

Communicating Chinese Ceramics: A Study of Material Culture Theory in Selected Museums in Britain

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by

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Wing Yan, Vivian, TING

Many museums in the United Kingdom house fabulous collections of Chinese ceramics. These objects demonstrate, on the one hand, how craftsmen, connoisseurs and literati users made tactile contact with the object in the cultural context of traditional China; and, on the other hand, reveal the interesting processes by which they were collected, adopted into museum culture and have created new meanings for British museum visitors. However, I argue that these objects are generally silent, because museum interpretation tends to reduce their materiality to visual narration, confining their interactions with visitors to the detached and static.

This research aims to transform and animate object-human relationship through the development of an interpretive model highlighting sensory experiences, aesthetic sensibilities and reflective understanding. The proposed model outlines three interpretive principles – emphatic responses, metaphorical associations and multi-sensory designs – that define the object as an active enterprise embodying sensuous and emotive experiences of the past. In addition, it advocates a tactile mode of looking that empowers objects to speak of human experiences through their perceptual qualities while encouraging visitors to undergo self-discovery journeys in connection with the work.

To ground my theory within a practical museum context, I examined visitors' interpretive strategies and conducted a series of interpretive experiments, involving Chinese material culture, at the Bristol City Museum (BCM) and the Museum of East Asian Art at Bath (MEAA). Informed by visitors' responses and my theoretical construction, these experiments aimed to develop a dynamic mode of object-human communication in exhibitions and to expand the scope of museum experiences.

In relation to professional museum concerns with diversity and accessibility, it is contended that a sensuous theory of material culture will explore diverse voices embodied by the objects and contribute to the development of a truly communicative and inclusive culture in museums.

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Chapter 1

‘A thing is a thing. Why bother?’¹

1.1 Silent ceramics



Figure 1.1 An overview of Schiller Gallery in the Bristol City Museum
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)

In the summer of 2004, I started working in the Bristol City Museum (BCM) as a student intern. Participating in the BCM's relabelling project, I was excited by the richness of its Chinese ceramic collection, which includes Neolithic pots dating to 6,000 years ago, blue and white vases decorated in Arabian style that witness cultural exchanges between the regions, and polychromes showcasing the technical expertise of the

¹ The quote is a remark related to an interpretive activity of ceramic pieces made by a college tutor who participated in my experimental project at the Bristol City Museum (BCM) (15 January 2007). According to my field experiences, such a comment is not uncommon in the sense that visitors are skeptical about the significance of material culture in human history. Therefore, the quote is cited in considering what museological studies of material culture is and how it can serve wider audience. Further details of the experimental project at BCM, please refer to chapter 6.3.

imperial kiln in the 18th century (figure 1.1). I felt this collection should be appreciated as one of the best in the United Kingdom at demonstrating the cross-cultural travelling of ideas attached to ceramics and the aesthetic genius of traditional craftsmanship. However, the more time I spent in the Schiller gallery, the more disheartened I became, that the collection is displayed in a remote area of the museum where visitors, Westerners or Chinese alike, would pass by the display cases barely glancing at the objects and showing little interest in exploring them. In contrast to the responsibility of museums to preserve material culture in order to foster public understanding and enjoyment (Museums Association 2005: 8), the collection becomes merely a backdrop in the building, and fails to communicate its intrinsic values and the stories it has to tell. It seemed to me that despite its survival through time, a collection such as this, that is unconnected to contemporary life in stirring emotions, exploring knowledge and inspiring ideas, could be considered 'dead'. I wanted to explore the question of whether its silence is due to inappropriate interpretation or to the collection's irrelevance to contemporary society, and to ask how such a Chinese ceramic collection could be re-vitalised and enabled to speak for itself.

To start the enquiry, I first investigated whether the disconnection between the ceramic collection and its visitors also occurs at other museums. According to the online database websites, such as the *24 Hours Museum* and *Cornucopia*, there are about 42 museums in this

country housing significant Chinese collections.² Whilst a few of these, for example the Oriental Museum in Durham and the Museum of East Asian Art in Bath, focus on East Asian cultures, and many other institutions – which we might call ‘integrated museums’ – such as the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, and the British Museum in London, hold diverse collections ranging from archaeological objects, through art works to East Asian collections. Using the principle of representative sampling (Deacon *et al* 1999: 53), I visited 15 institutions including integrated museums of different sizes, such as the British Museum, the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, the Lady Lever Art Gallery in Port Sunlight, Merseyside and the Plymouth City Museum; and specialist institutions dedicated to world cultures, for example the Horniman Museum in London, the Oriental Museum in Durham and the Museum of East Asian Art (MEAA) in Bath between July 2004 and August 2005. During these museum trips which usually took place on Saturday and Sunday, I spent half a day studying the exhibition of the Chinese collection: the spatial layout, design of the display, juxtaposition of objects, and text and other interpretive aids, such as illustrations and videos. In the other half of the trip, I stayed in the exhibition areas observing visitors’ responses to the displays. The

² Limited information makes it difficult to determine how many museums in the United Kingdom house Chinese ceramic collections. Since the 16th century, collecting Chinese ceramics has been very popular among the upper and middle classes, and many museums and heritage houses holding Georgian and Victorian collections display a considerable amount of Chinese export wares. For instance, the Victoria Art Gallery in Bath has put about 50 pieces of blue and white porcelain or polychromes on display and yet no online database, including the *Cornucopia* and the Gallery website, mentions the collection. Also, some Chinese ceramic collections have not been well-documented by museums and are thus missed by online databases. For example, it was only in late 2006 that the Royal Albert Memorial Museum at Exeter was funded to conduct proper research into its ceramic collection from East Asia. It has now concluded that it holds about 250 pieces of ceramics from China (Eccles, Tony 2007, Personal communication, 5 April). In some cases, the online databases suggest a museum owns a collection of Chinese ceramics, but in fact most of the collection may come from nearby regions rather than China itself. For instance, the Sainsbury Centre at Norwich does keep a modest collection of Chinese ceramics, but most of its East Asian art comes from Japan.

observation criteria were preliminary, in that I only examined whether visitors were interested in the exhibitions, what types of objects they specially looked at, and how they interacted with the interpretive aids.

From my pilot observations, visitors to integrated museums were likely to browse through the collections quickly, while visitors to specialist museums were inclined to show a greater interest in the exhibitions. In terms of visitors' interests, the plain-coloured monochromes, for instance, the Ding wares or Longquan celadons, which were highly praised by Sinologists and collectors, were far less appealing than objects shaped in the form of, or decorated with, representational elements, such as figures or mystical animals. Nonetheless, when visitors were interested in a piece of work, they tended to refer to the interpretive text. In some cases, illustrations and videos might catch the visitors' attention and encourage them to look at the collections by offering more contextual information. In general, a small number of Chinese objects, such as a figure of a tomb guardian or a dragon robe, attracted particular interest, however, a significant part of the collections failed to 'speak' to a wide range of audiences.

Based on these pilot studies, I became convinced that carrying out research into the communication of Chinese material culture would be valid in two ways. First, many museums in the United Kingdom house wonderful Chinese ceramic collections, but sadly many of them are underused, not well-documented, poorly researched or improperly displayed. For example, the Chinese collection of the Lady Lever Art Gallery had not been

catalogued for more than half a century until, in 2006, the Museum collaborated with the University of Glasgow to document properly its Chinese objects (Chung Yuping, 2006, Personal communication, 27 November). The National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, a national museum holding a wide range of Chinese ceramics, had put up a sign stating that its information was outdated when I visited the museum in September 2005. In the Ceramic gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, the objects were displayed in wooden cases alongside minimal interpretation, which had been produced on a type-writer. The underuse of these in-house collections poses the question of whether Chinese material culture is actually of interest to visitors at all. Yet when one considers recent blockbuster exhibitions brought to the United Kingdom from China, such as 'China: Three Emperors: 1662-1795' at the Royal Academy of Arts, London (12 November 2005 – 17 April 2006) and 'The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army' at the British Museum (13 September 2007 – 6 April 2008), it is clear that Chinese material culture can indeed be relevant and interesting if it is able to reach visitors.

The second reason that research into the communication of Chinese material culture is that museum interpretation – both that oriented to specialists and more socially inclusive approaches – tends to isolate the objects from visitors, despite its efforts to connect the two. When Chinese collections began entering British institutions in the early 20th century, museum texts were informed by connoisseurship, technology and sinology, and certain disciplinary studies such as archaeology, art history and/or Chinese history (Pierson 2000: 65). This conventional, specialist-oriented

approach arranges collections by genre or production period, and implies a linear historical development. To visitors who have little prior knowledge of the field, the terminology derived by Western scholars and collectors, such as 'famille verte', 'Tekmoku ware' or 'wucai style', is exclusive and the meaning is difficult to grasp. The interpretation tends to be factual rather than analytical, in that it does not decipher the rationale behind an artistic expression and fails to suggest to visitors where or how to look at an object. It is likely that those galleries that appeal to experts and connoisseurs, then, remain obscure to visitors who have no prior knowledge or interest in the collections. The emptiness of these exhibition spaces is an indicator, suggesting the collections are disconnected from wider audiences.

In contrast, in recent years professional museum communication and education has employed approaches that encourage more dynamic object-human relationships.³ Exhibition spaces have been refurbished into visitor-friendly areas where ceramics have been juxtaposed with other artefacts including bronzes, textiles, and furniture, according to interpretive themes such as ancestor worship and eating and drinking. To enhance understanding of Chinese culture, education activities and other means of communication, such as computer catalogues or audio guides, have put the objects into context. Appealing to visitors' established knowledge or image of Chinese culture, this popularist approach implies that Chinese ceramic collections can be relevant to contemporary life. However, there is an apparent conflict between sinology and accessibility, at best leading

³ To name a few examples, the T T Tsui Gallery in the Victoria and Albert Museum was refurbished in 1991 (Kerr 1995); the Ivy Wu Gallery in the Royal Museum opened in 1996 (Art Critic London 1996) and the World Museum at Liverpool re-opened in 2005 (National Museums Liverpool 2005).

visitors to study information rather than the object itself or, at worst, appealing to spectacular settings that reduce objects to three-dimensional illustrations of exhibitionary themes. To an extent, this interpretive approach regards objects as physical representations of its narration of culture – and as a result, risks disconnecting the formal qualities of objects from visitors. It seems, then, that regardless of their efforts in developing communicative channels, both the specialist-oriented and the popularist interpretations fail to facilitate a dynamic object-human relationship true to the object's materiality and sensitive to the visitors' needs.

During my visits to various museums, I kept imagining the objects were weeping for their lost 'voices' whenever visitors passed them without looking or looked without trying to understand. These objects had undergone various forms of adversity, such as wars and natural disasters, and eventually entered museums – temples for heritage and remembrance, and yet here they were neglected and disconnected from living society. I became convinced that if visitors could see each of these pieces *per se*, they would discover a universe of sensual beauty and human stories.

How, then, could the professional interpretation of objects, specifically Chinese ceramics, create a meaningful object-human engagement? How could this engagement create an enjoyable and reflective museum experience that would keep in constant touch with the living present? In addressing these questions, I aimed to formulate an interpretive model that could empower objects to speak for themselves and foster inspiring, dynamic and creative object-human relationships.

Highlighting the 'personhood' of an object may seem an over-sentimental metaphor. However, this can be justified partly by my intellectual interest in material culture studies, and partly by emotional affinity with the Chinese collections. Inspired by phenomenology, I argue that material culture does not only concern the material, or the culture it embodies, but also the interactions between objects and people that inform our object-related life experiences. I define material culture as an organic union of material and human experiences. It can also be understood as an embodiment of a reciprocal process in which human needs give rise to the creation and function of an object, while the material shapes human experiences in various ways defined by the culture. In addition to its utilitarian significance, the object embodies human emotions, ideas, actions and events through its interaction with people. In other words, objects exist in the way they have been viewed, used, and treasured by generations of people. If disconnected from people, museum collections could be considered inert or dead as they cease to accumulate new meanings for living people. Visitors' ways of seeing, or specifically museums' interpretation, can suggest ways of seeing different from our daily routine – indeed, such a notion sits at the core of museological studies of material culture. Therefore, I use the metaphor of 'living objects' to underline the human agency embodied by the Chinese collection, such as the collectors' choices, curators' efforts and my own feelings.

The human metaphor also reveals that Chinese ceramics are of particular interest to me because the objects and I share the same identity

of being Chinese. However, this research project does not attempt to redefine Chineseness, nor necessarily to promote understanding of the culture through the collections. I am aware that Chinese ceramic collections have already taken on another cultural life in British institutions, generating new meanings, such as aesthetic appreciation of pure forms and colours or inspiration for studio potters. As literature on identity theories suggests, emphasising cross-cultural understanding could make one inclined to be obsessive about being 'ones self' for others and inevitably essentialise the notion of Chineseness (Chow 1988: 7-10; Ang 2001: 38). In order to embrace the diverse meanings the objects have acquired and embodied throughout history and across cultures, I have considered Chinese ceramics in a context of human heritage. According to Edward Said (1994: 15-16), all cultures are heterogeneous in that we learn from each other in enriching our own culture – thus Beethoven's symphonies belong to Germans and to people from any part of the world. Similarly, I contend that traditional Chinese ceramics, like many forms of art, have emerged from wide ranges of ideas and embraced multi-layered human experiences through the ages. They should therefore not only concern Chinese people but also diverse audiences, fostering aesthetic enjoyment and enabling the celebration of cultural diversity (Ang 2001: 198).

Looking at Chinese collections within the context of human heritage, I have focused on the potential interactions between ceramics and museum visitors. Through this, I have redefined the object-human relationship in a museum context, and suggested interpretation that could engage visitors in

a reflective dialogue. Informed by various material culture theories, I have developed an interpretive approach that engages museum visitors with the perceptual qualities of objects as they embody human agency, such as craftsmen's skills and techniques, and connoisseurs' sensibilities. To ground the proposed model within a practical museum context, the BCM, an integrated regional museum, and the MEAA, a specialist museum dedicated to East Asian Art, were my two research sites. I reviewed these museums' interpretations of Chinese ceramics and examined visitors' responses to the exhibitions. This information helped construct the interpretive framework, and I subsequently ran interpretive trials to validate the feasibility of my approach. My proposed interpretive model gained reflectivity by balancing practicality and theoretical construction in different exhibition settings and, consequently, is able to inform a communicative mode of material culture in a wider museological context.

In this introductory chapter, I outline the recent discussions and challenges of interpreting material culture for museum audiences, in order to underpin the theoretical issues that have informed this study. I then unpack the theoretical assumptions and arguments developed throughout this project, in order further to elaborate the research questions and justify my methodological approach. Finally, I outline the structure of this thesis.

1.2 Exploring material culture in museums

This project is a museological and material culture theory enquiry, which considers how the museum object *per se* might enrich visitors' experiences and illuminate our understanding of humanity. To put the

project into context, I will review recent discussions within the museum sector in relation to material culture studies. First, I discuss how the development of contemporary museums suggests new approaches in understanding objects. Second, I look into the arguments between the object- and people-oriented approaches in considering how museum object can serve wide ranges of audiences.

Evolving from cabinets of curiosity and intellectual displays of an orderly world view, the museum has long been considered as an authoritative caretaker of collections, preserving, studying and exhibiting objects 'rationally' in order to articulate material evidence within a Western system of knowledge making (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 192-194; Bennett 1995:24, 34-35; Duncan 1995: 13-20). The development of modern museums implies a static and linear object-human communication, which assumes that visitors are a passive 'mass', receiving 'monologic' information, and does not take their diverse experiences into account (Hooper-Greenhill 1999a). In recent decades, many in the museum and heritage sector have reflected upon its visions, missions and objectives, especially in relation to who it is serving and how it could expand its capacity to accommodate diverse socio-cultural needs within a society (Kavanagh 1999; Sandell 2002; Weil 2002). This institutional reflectivity positions the contemporary museum as a communicative and inclusive powerhouse that generates enjoyment, creativity and knowledge and urges new thinking about museological material culture, which foregrounds objects, interpretation and visitors' experiences. Embracing civic responsibilities, members of the profession argue that museums' primary

concerns should lie not in objects but in communication that makes collections from the past or from other cultures relevant to contemporary society and advocates ideas, such as equality and cultural tolerance, for the betterment of society (Hooper-Greenhill 2000b; Birtley 2002; Donahue 2004; Gurian 2006b).

In developing a more dynamic relationship between collections and communities, the sector has conducted visitors' studies, which examine how collections are used and by whom, and delivered education and outreach projects inviting different communities to contribute personal narrations of objects to supplement institutional interpretation (Hooper-Greenhill 1994; MacDonald 1995). Whilst surveys help to reveal the expectations and responses of an anonymous public, community interpretive projects relocate objects within a multi-vocal context; both democratise institutional dictatorship and enable collections to be more relevant and responsive to contemporary social life. To an extent, they challenge material culture studies not to remain limited to disciplinary research that scrutinises every detail of an object's provenance and disseminates the information in a rational manner specifically designed for a coterie of experts and connoisseurs. Despite approval and praise gained from audiences and the media, some of the interpretive projects have been criticised, from within and outside the sector, as cliché-ridden, superficial and 'dumbing down' of academic standards (Appleton 2007). How can museums communicate material culture in a way that is meaningful to wide range of audiences? How can the profession facilitate such an object-human communication? More fundamentally, what *is* material

culture in a museological context?

Unfortunately, the field is fraught with arguments – most notably the dichotomy between object- and people-oriented approaches towards collections – and theoretical inadequacy in developing communicative studies of material culture in museological contexts (Jenkinson 1989). At one end of the spectrum, there are 'object-persons', such as curator-specialists, who contend that the real object is a material leftover of the past, embodying individual humanity shared by us, regardless of the change of space and time. For them, the object's materiality is a powerful means of communication in triggering our sensory perceptions and emotional responses, and thus offers key insights into people of the past that is difficult to obtain by other means (Greenblatt 1991; Pearce 1992: 43-47; Prown 2001).

On the other hand, the 'people-persons', such as educationalists and visual culturalists, argue that objects are dumb and require viewers to obtain specific knowledge in order to decipher an object's tactile language. In examining visitors' meaning-making process, the people-persons hold that just as individual interests and experiences vary, an object can elicit numerous meanings that may be contrary to a museum's intended message. Hence, they argue that looking at objects *per se* would discourage visitors from relating to personal narrations and the larger issues of human experience (Vergo 1989: 48-49; Hooper-Greenhill 2000b: 49-50; Gurian 2006a: 45).

It should be stressed, of course, that the tensions between object- and people-oriented approaches are far more complicated than this apparent dichotomy in reality, in that different interpretation strategies are devised across the spectrum in response to practical concerns, such as museum agenda, exhibition objectives, negotiation among museum workers including curators and educators, interaction between the institution and its target audience, and so on. Nonetheless, I argue that my dichotomised categorization is helpful in understanding the critical rationales underlying museum practices.

In fact, what underlies these dichotomised arguments, is the human experiences embedded within the entangled relationship between object and people. Living with a great variety of objects, we tend to project part of ourselves – for example, memories, personality or love – into our possessions, while the very materiality of our objects shapes our perceptions, behaviours and even modes of thinking. The ‘object-persons’ are insightful in considering the sensory stimulations triggered by an object as a cornerstone of understanding a culture apart from ourselves. However, their knowledge and passion about objects focuses on an object’s provenance and/or information related to its creator or culture, and seldom appeals to the sensory and emotional responses that an object may once have been intended to trigger (Pearce 1992: 209; Serota 1997: 55). Such an interpretive approach seems to ignore how to communicate the richness of material culture to museum audiences. In addition, as shown by some anthropologists, exhibition designs and museum etiquettes are planned in such a way as to inhibit visitors’ tactile experiences for the sake of

collection management, and thus impose a visual-oriented experience, which is rational and rigid (Classen and Howes 2006; Feldman 2006). It is ironic that the museum, an apparatus for preserving and demonstrating material culture, adopts interpretive strategies that reduce the collection from a multi-sensory being into a visual discourse and neglects how materiality can help to promote empathic understanding about people from other temporal and spatial contexts. In this respect, the 'people-persons' are right about the nature of museological material culture, in that it is neither the object nor the viewers *per se*, but an interactive approach between the two or a way of looking in the museum context, that can communicate the collection's meanings. Hence, they hold that the materiality of a museum object is unlikely to communicate with visitors, and its interpretation should also incorporate visitors' prior knowledge and interests. This line of argument foregrounds visitors' experiences in a way that, to some extent, risks overlooking the sensory stimulations an object would have triggered. To the people-persons, an object can be used to present human experiences, including stories and ideas, which are not necessarily related to its material qualities. This is an important aspect of a museum object that defines what a museum is and distinguishes it from other organisations, such as ethnographic theme parks or centres of folk culture.

To mediate between the object- and people-oriented perspectives, I have defined the museum collection as an 'object-human manifold', thus emphasising the reciprocal interaction between objects and people. I propose that studies of museum collections and objects should highlight

how human experiences, especially sensory perceptions and emotional responses, may be structured by the materiality of objects. Hence, the major task of this research is twofold. First, it constructs an interpretive framework exploring how to re-present an object-human manifold of the past to visitors in such a way as to facilitate another layer of the object-human relationship in personal experiences and contemporary concerns. Second, it proposes various approaches, including sensory and visual means, to enable visitors to make sense of the material, as well as the culture from whence an object comes, in highlighting human experiences as the core of object-human communication.

In short, I propose a model of material culture that emphasises tactile experiences in order to communicate Chinese ceramic collections to a wider audience in the museum context. Stressing sensory pleasures an object would have triggered, this proposed approach of interpretation attempts to connect visitors to the materiality of a museum object.

1.3 Material culture as embodiment

The complexity of material culture lies not only in the entangled object-human relationship, but also in the diverse forms of material ranging from humble daily life items to enchanting artworks. The diversity of physical forms contributes to the interdisciplinary nature of material culture studies and these benefit from a wide variety of methods and theories, for instance, archaeology, anthropology and art history. As Daniel Miller (2003: 6) argues, researchers should develop a specific strategy in relation to the uniqueness of a particular form of material, while offering an overview that

informs how such a domain might fit into the larger picture of the material world. In terms of this research, I have focused on Chinese ceramics, a domain of objects that can be considered as dining wares, household displays, stationary, ceremonial vessels or collectables, of which the formal qualities of objects would have structured a wide range of human experiences, such as food culture, symbolism and belief, and/or connoisseurs' practices. Hence, I have appealed to anthropologists' theory of embodiment in examining the bodily interaction between objects and people. Through reviewing recent literature, which considers how material culture can be studied, this section attempts to justify my research focus on materiality.

According to James Deetz (1996:35), material culture is 'that sector of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behavior'. Serving people for various needs, it is the physical evidence of human events and activities and thus, its perceptual qualities reveal principles that tie a whole society together. To unpack the intricate object-human relationship, the study of material culture has two dimensions of enquiry; first, to consider why humans need such an object, and second, to ask how the object changes human experiences and mentalities. The former suggests researching into psychological needs, socio-cultural practices and economic considerations in relation to the creation and possession of an object; whereas the latter investigates how the materiality of an object links with socio-cultural opportunities and constraints for individual and even collective practices.

For instance, Strathern and Strathern (1971), from a structuralist's perspective, analyse body art as a form of 'writing' that illustrates cultural conventions and religious values. On the other hand, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), taking a micro-view, study how people crave meanings in their home possessions, such as furniture, television sets or family photographs, in shaping contemporary urban life. Turning from individual attachment to collective desires for things, Douglas and Isherwood (1979) examine how the changing roles and trajectory of goods define social relationships. Despite their different foci and research methods, all these studies demonstrate how a mute object can shed new light on socio-cultural articulations. However, they tend to perceive objects as 'inadvertent' expressions of culture, with the formal qualities of objects not, in themselves, necessarily expressions of culture at all. To an extent, then, these studies leave the voices of the material objects themselves, unheard.

Building upon these insightful researches, recent studies of material culture have shifted from socio-cultural discourses to the object *per se*, in further examining the intriguing relationship between material and culture, and mind and body (Buchli 2002: 7; Tilley 2006: 3). Inspired by hermeneutic or phenomenological ontology in which the object occupies a state of 'in-betweenness', researchers argue that rather than being a passive presence to which people attach personal and cultural significance, an object's material properties take an 'active' role in shaping human life (Edwards 2002: 8-9). For example, Alfred Gell (1998) argues that artwork arose from human needs and is a form of action extending human agency

to change the world. Emphasising the object and its social relationships, he suggests objects embody human intentions in social relations and organise recipients' responses. Further exploring objects' roles in the human world, Glenn Willumson (2004) traces the trajectory of three different forms of photograph albums and demonstrates how the materiality of photographs creates in social situations a specific viewing experience that magnifies the image's significance. Similarly, Tim Dant (2005) uses car repair work as an example to highlight the unconscious and yet adaptable characteristics of object-human interaction in contemporary society. He argues that whilst a wide variety of tools requires technicians to develop certain physical practices, the team's creativity and effort would be embodied by the modified mechanical substitutes in handling specific situations (2005: 108-135).

These studies emphasise the sensual attributions of objects and their interaction with people's bodily experiences, both physical and emotional; as a result, they bring new understandings of culture that highlight human intentions and activities in relation to the surrounding environment. Their foci on materiality imply that material culture is not merely the physical properties of object *nor* the bodily perceptions it imposes on people. Rather, it is the reciprocal process of interaction between object and human, dissolving material and culture sensually, simultaneously and irrationally (Witmore 2004; Miller 2005). These researches suggest that material culture studies can be considered as intellectual enquiry into a tactile form of communication – a bodily interaction between object and human. Hence, my research interest in articulating a communicative approach of material

culture ties in with theoretical concerns in material culture studies in redefining the role of an object.

However, the emphasis on materiality is not left unchallenged. According to Tim Ingold (2007), discussions on materiality have actually been dematerialised, so risking overlooking how the material properties of an object might interact with the surrounding environment and evolve into another form of material – and thus mistaking the active role of an object. Ingold's argument is justified in reminding researchers to consider that the object is in flux and unstable and will interact with its surrounding environment according to its material properties. However, he seems to neglect people's role during this process of change, in which individuals would act to conform to, or deny, the principle of the changes, and consequently attach another layer of meaning in response to the new perceptual quality (Tilley 2007). To a certain extent, Ingold's call for an emphasis on the material can be understood as arising from the tension between people- and object-focused research, again suggesting that the entwined object-human relationship is ambiguous and complex. I hold the view that the notion of materiality is tangible and also intangible, in that it can reveal comparatively unexplored aspects of humanity such as emotions and sensuous experiences embodied by formal qualities of objects. Materiality is such an unrefined realm that is difficult to outline the boundaries between material and culture. What is more problematic is that the field has not yet developed an appropriate set of vocabulary to properly describe the ambiguity and spontaneity of materiality. In articulating a model of material culture, I have to employ conventional terms creatively to

theorise the in-betweenness of objects within the matrix of human emotions, actions and events. I admit that this sensuous approach of material culture may be raw, clumsy and obscure – characteristics at odds with the purpose of this research to communicate objects to a wider audience. However, I argue that it is the very theoretical clumsiness that illustrates the dynamics of materiality and brings visitors closer to the heart of exploring an unrefined, object-related experience, such as memories of immigration, celebrations of love, or desire to follow fashion. By openly embracing feelings and experiences, I argue that the museum could nurture a meaningful and creative object-human relationship that enables the object to speak for itself and visitors to reflect upon the human condition of being.

Inspired by the anthropological discussions on embodiment, I have argued that the emphasis on materiality enables researchers to relate the formal qualities of an object to relatively under-documented aspects of human experiences, such as sensory perceptions and emotional responses. Putting this in the museum context, this implies that magnifying materiality would help to foster sensuous and affective object-human communication that will enable better understanding of the past.

1.4 Material culture as art

In my research into the human experiences that a piece of ceramic ware would have embodied, the embodiment theories that I have drawn upon suggest that I should adopt a historical perspective to locate the object in its cultural context and examine its interaction with its creators, users and collectors. On the other hand, it is equally important to adopt an

aesthetic perspective by investigating decorative art history to explore the sensory perceptions triggered by the formal qualities of ceramics and the subjective connotations associated with the culture (Coote 1992: 267-268; Bennett 1993: 85; Morphy 1994: 672-673). Such an aesthetic approach highlights the intrinsic values of ceramics imposed by its medium and illuminates our perceptions to an extent that 'suspends its own objecthood' (Fried 1998: 161-162). To museum visitors, it suggests an alternative way of seeing that looks at ceramics not just for its historical or utilitarian significance, but also for the beauties of its materials *per se*. However, I realise that perceiving objects from other cultures as art may impose Western notions on the interpretation of the culture concerned; it is also debatable whether ceramic wares can be considered as an art rather than a craft. Drawing upon the discussions of anthropologists and art historians, this section looks at the arguments related to these different classifications of objects and aims to justify the proposed interpretive approach, which is historically grounded as well as aesthetically oriented.

According to James Clifford (1988: 220-225), non-Western objects have long been categorised into two major groups: cultural artefacts produced by craftsmen who conform to traditional practices and collective values and expressions, and aesthetic works of art that embody the originality of an individual or a small group of 'geniuses'. While the concept of an artefact suggests that researchers should study the object as first-hand evidence from the past that shows 'the totality of the relevant environment' (Hodder 1986: 139), which would be otherwise undocumented in text (Schlereth 1983; Deetz 1996: 258-259), the notion of

art emphasises the importance of the formal qualities and the aesthetic effect of an object in relation to the meanings endorsed by the society it comes from (Firth 1992: 16-17; Marcus and Myers 1995: 14-15; Morphy 2000: 658-660). It is problematic, however, that these analyses are likely to convey a sense of high-mindedness and disinterestedness, and may appropriate non-Western objects into Western modernistic systems of values, ignoring the voices of the host culture (Clifford 1988: 220-221; Baxandall 1991: 40).

However, as art historian Jules David Prown suggests, adopting an aesthetic lens in an enquiry into material culture does not necessarily impose the researcher's system of knowledge making and ignore the cultural context of an object. On the contrary, he argues that examining the style, form and materials of an artwork affixes the study of material culture to its historical context and also stresses the aesthetic effect triggered by the material qualities of the object. Such an analysis, which engages materiality with one's senses, enables the researcher to re-enact the bodily experiences shared by the object and its creators or users from the past, which would otherwise be undecipherable through written records (2001: 229). It is therefore a subjective, affective way to interpret culture, not through the mind, the seat of our cultural bias, but through the senses (*ibid* 232-233).

Prown's notion of 'art as evidence' is also echoed by many studies of the anthropology of art and aesthetics, which question how forms can be reconciled with functions and how visual elements provoke the sensory

effect of which meaning or value is mediated (Coote and Shelton 1992: 3-4, 8-10; Morphy 2000: 662; Gell 2000: 56-57). For instance, Jeremy Coote's research into the Nilotic attributes of cattle – markings, horn configurations and general physical features – has demonstrated how aesthetic properties influence people's perception of light, colour and shape (1992). Howard Morphy, focusing on the aesthetic quality of shininess and the different cultural responses it elicits among the Yolngu, the Wahgi people and the Mende, argues that aesthetic effects are integral to art, revealing values and emotional responses embedded within the cultural system as a whole (2000: 672-677). He states that the Yolngu's experience of *bir'yun* ('shimmering brilliance') can be interpreted as the power of the ancestral beings shining out from a painting (*ibid* 675). On the other hand, the Wahgi people consider the shininess of their elaborate body paintings to be an indication of health, fertility and power. To the Mende, shininess arises from the polished blackness of the *sowo-wui* mask, which connotes the essence of female beauty and moral purity. In each case, the quality of brilliance excites sensory responses involving the cultural control over people's responses.

My thinking about what Chinese ceramics can offer to museum visitors leads me to argue that studying aesthetic effects, as the Chinese literatures of traditional connoisseurs suggest, is an imaginative approach associated with museum objects that enables visitors to explore culture from different perspectives. Traditional connoisseurship is of particular interest because it is an important aspect of material culture that demonstrates the cultural connotations of sensory experiences and the formal qualities of ceramics.

As Craig Clunas suggests, it has been used by art historians for object identification, but it has been gradually recognised by culture historians who explore aesthetic imaginations and the sensory interaction between collectables and intellectual collectors (Clunas 1991: 8-9; Mao 2000; Wang 2001; Wu 2003: 243-257). For example, considering how a red glaze is described in Chinese as 'drunken beauty', or suggesting a specific way to hold a wine cup to experience the texture of the vessel and the drink, would encourage visitors to return to their own bodily experiences and reflect upon how others might engage in the world differently. It is by recognising aesthetic effects and formal qualities that Chinese ceramics can be experienced for the sensory pleasures they would have brought to users or connoisseurs in specific cultural contexts. In this sense, this interpretive approach attempts to transform the object from an intellectual discourse into a vivid experience that stimulates visitors' sensibilities by associating material culture with the people it concerns.

Apart from the debate between artwork and artifact, I am aware that it is controversial to define ceramics as 'art' rather than 'craft'. According to some art theorists, for instance Collingwood (1974: 15-31), craft is created to serve a practical function and this confines craftsmen to the pursuit of technical skills to such an extent that it hampers their creativity and artistic expressions, and thus the finished pieces have limited aesthetic value. Art, on the other hand, is a sensory means used by the artist to reflect upon his/her life experiences, and its value lies in its spiritual significance, but not its formal qualities or artist's technical virtuosity (*ibid* 130).

However, distinguishing art from craft eviscerates and makes socially irrelevant the artwork, causing confusion rather than a better appreciation. Collingwood does not explain why art should be confined within a sanctified boundary detached from any utilitarian functions. In fact, art historians argue that craft works were produced as a hybrid practice of craft and art and that such a division reveals the complex historical and cultural discourses of the dominating high culture (Lees-Maffei and Sandino 2004; Ihatsu 1996: 22-23). Throughout art history, many great pieces of art, such as Michelangelo's sculpture or Giotto's polyptych, also serve a practical function in response to the patrons' requirements. According to some popular criteria of craft, such as being easily understood, affordable, maintaining a long tradition or being made of natural materials, craft has been defined in comparison to art in a way which implies dichotomy, like high/low culture, intellectuals/laymen or male/female (Lucie-Smith 1981: 269-276; Frayling 1992: 169-170; Rowley 1997; Greenhalgh 2002). My viewing of Chinese ceramics as art denies such a division and looks for an alternate approach to highlight the sensory perceptions elicited by material culture *per se*.

The plight of the Chinese ceramics I encountered convinced me that it is critical to consider the collection aesthetically in order to highlight experiences of people from the past. According to my observations in MEAA and BCM, the ceramics, whether produced by imperial kilns or other craftsmen, have been perceived as ordinary things that are lifeless, visually uninteresting and cold. In seeking to ignite visitors' interest in the collections, I argue that an appropriate interpretive approach would be

informed by art theories in its attempt to establish emotional and/or intellectual links between art and audience (Morphy 1989; Greenblatt 1991; Miller 2000). For instance, formalism proposes looking at art for its intrinsic values, such as well-balanced form and delicate texture, and argues that art can be an absorbing experience that makes life worth living (Bell 1987: 25-27, 81-82; Greenburg 1986: 8). Thus museums could show the visitor how to interact with an artwork sensuously and creatively, in developing his/her personal interpretation of the work. On the other hand, turning to the human voice embedded in the work, expressionism suggests exploring how the artist mediates between an artistic tradition, medium and personal experiences: an approach that would offer museum visitors layers of sensuous, emotional and intellectual stimulations with which to reflect upon the human condition (Collingwood 1974: 141-144, 336). This approach would broaden the scope of museum experience from looking at an object's formal qualities to understanding the artistic stimulus behind it and its appeal to universal human experiences. Showing an even more explicit concern with art and contemporary society, pragmatism suggests art is a reflective account of an artist – which can only emerge when the viewer genuinely relates the artist's experiences to his/her own condition through perceiving the object's sensuous qualities (Dewey 1980: 17-19). Applying this to museum context, Dewey's notion justifies personal meanings comprising a valid tool for interacting with an object through its socio-cultural matrix. This would mean democratising curatorial hegemony and consequently validating diverse, personal meanings. Overall, these art theories demonstrate that making sense of art is a creative interaction between artwork, artist and viewers. Each highlighting one unique aspect

of art, they inform the museum of the diverse possibilities one can elicit from an artwork in order to examine the multi-layers of object-human relationships over time.

In this section, I have argued that Chinese ceramics can be studied as an artwork engages museum visitors to explore the bodily experiences it would have shared with its creators, users or collectors from the past. I hold that this aesthetic enquiry grounds the perceptual qualities of Chinese ceramics within the matrix of traditional aesthetics, connoisseurship, culture history and technological development in retracing the multi-sensory experiences a piece of ceramic could offer. In other words, this interpretive approach is aesthetic as well as historically-grounded, in exploring diverse human experiences relating to different aspects of Chinese ceramics, for instance formal qualities, function, symbolic significance and aesthetic sensibilities, and consequently bringing better understanding of the past and consequently the present.

1.5 Material culture as communication

Informed by the dynamic nature of material culture, I propose that materiality – the physical embodiment of object-human relationships – should be located at the core of its studies. In the museum context, the educational role of the institution endows material culture with the ability to produce, for instance, aesthetic inspiration, understanding of the past, or aspiration for civil rights, thus indicating the potential for developing another dimension of the object-human relationship through the tactile language of objects. Therefore, the museum object can be understood as an aspect of

communication – that also includes text, illustrations and exhibition design – to send a message. In other words, material culture is a tactile form of communication interchanging ideas and thoughts, by encouraging visitors to interact with its materiality. This object-human communication is a meaning-making mechanism in which the museum could enable objects to speak, whilst visitors make sense of those objects according to both the museum's interpretation and visitors' own personal experiences. Influenced by mass media research and learning theories, the museum profession has gradually begun to examine the interaction between its medium and its visitors (Falk and Dierking 1997; Hodge and D'Souza 1999; Hein 1999). In this section, I have outlined the issues and ideas that museums have adapted and which contribute to the formulation of my interpretive approach to facilitate object-human communication.

1.5.1 Communication theories and museum

Considering the museum as a site of mass media, communicating material culture for a wide ranging, anonymous audience is challenging. Conversation, crowds, boredom and even poorly displayed and lit objects easily distract from the transmission of the messages (Hooper-Greenhill 1999a:32). To reflect upon how the communication mechanism operates in the museum context, Silverman and Hooper-Greenhill explored different models of the communication process. Even though some of the models were oversimplified in understanding the role of viewers in the process of meaning making, they reveal alarming lessons (Silverman 1991: 63; Hooper-Greenhill 1999c: 7-8). In early linear models of communication, for example, the 'magic bullet' theory metaphorically describes a message as

a bullet fired from the media gun into the receivers' ears; while the 'uses and gratifications' model proposes that the audience is proactive in seeking a media message to satisfy its needs. The former reminds us of the museum as an authoritative cultural institution with an influence on shaping public opinion, while the latter model confirms that interaction between visitors and museum media such as text, is possible (*ibid*). Recently, the notion of polysemia – multi-meanings, summarising the success of a television episode as holding various meanings for diverse groups of people, is also insightful. It suggests that inclusivity is the key for the museum in establishing dialogue with visitors (Silverman 1991:63; Hooper-Greenhill 1999c: 9). By providing a variety of personal associations, museum interpretation empowers visitors to make their own meanings in which they are no longer a passive, non-selective receiver, but a partner of the museum which assists in transmitting a range of messages (Kavanagh 1999: 126-127). Considering the museum as an integral system of meaning making, these theories help the museum profession theorise its relationship with visitors.

Informed by these theories, museum professionals, especially educators and evaluators, are interested in investigating how visitors receive messages transmitted in exhibitions, or more precisely what visitors learn from museums. Falk and Dierking (2000) devise the 'Contextual Model of Learning' suggesting that learning, a process of meaning making, should be considered as an interaction between visitors' actual visiting experiences, personal context and social mediation. This framework is anchored in Hein's constructivist educational theory (1998c).

Hein suggests that a visitor constructs meaning into his/her personal context within specific social grounds and that, therefore, the museum should focus on the diverse needs of visitors in facilitating the processes. This perspective also illuminates how museums might motivate visitors to learn, or in a broad sense, interact, with the collections. These studies point out that multi-sensory stimulations and the situational context engage visitors to make sense of an exhibition and, therefore, underpin educative principles for devising learning projects and participatory installations in exhibition spaces. Many science centres, for example, commonly embrace these principles and design experimental activities and computer interactives to enable visitors to discover scientific phenomena (Feher 1990; Miles 1991). Many museums and art galleries have also set up hands-on activities and multi-sensory devices, such as dressing up in costumes, opinion sharing fora and videos featuring objects in their original cultural contexts (Phillips 1988; Worts 1995; Cassels 1996).

Work by Falk and Hein laid the foundation for this understanding of the processes of meaning making in museums, and suggested the need for empirical studies exploring visitors' meaning-making strategies and learning experiences. For instance, Hooper-Greenhill (2001a, 2001b) worked with Wolverhampton Art Gallery and Nottingham Castle Museum to investigate how visitors develop skills and vocabulary in making sense of paintings. Anderson et al. (2002) examined school children's museum experiences in four different sites and argued that incorporating play and story into exhibition design would foster the learning process of the target group. Although these studies tend to consider the museum as an integral

system of meaning making and pay less attention to object's role in the process, they shed new light on considering how to explore object-human interaction.

1.5.2 Learning, meaning making and material culture studies

Turning to discussions on museum education, I first have to clarify definitions of learning and meaning making in order to distinguish a communicative approach of material culture from educational notions that focus on learning through objects. There is a tendency in the museum profession to confine object-human communication to education teams and object-oriented research to curators. This limited view of material culture indicates a lack of a holistic plan of collections management and a misapprehension of objects' roles in the human world. Proposing a communicative approach of material culture, I argue that meaning is constructed through dialogue between museum objects and visitors. Meaning making is not an equivalent to learning; rather, learning is part of meaning making. To elaborate this argument, I then turn to Dewey's notions of meaning making and experience in defining the differences between learning and meaning making.

According to Dewey (1958: 137-139, 287-288), meaning is gained when we are in a dialogue with an object: we recognise the immediate qualities of object, compare them to our stored knowledge and personal experiences, mediate them through social context and enact meaning – a new set of immediate qualities – to reshape our perception of the surrounding environment. Meaning making can be a single or short,

interactional episode of the object-human relationship. It can also intersect with multiple, simultaneously ongoing interactions, both personally and socially, and thus constitute a more deep-seated involvement with the world, which Dewey refers as 'experience' (1958: 232-233). He holds that experience facilitates our contact with the world, for instance in feeling, thinking and doing (1938: 15-16), and that learning is an intellectual process that enables us to acquire skills, knowledge or ideas to solve our own problems (1961: 160). Putting Dewey's notion into a museum context, *meaning making* refers to a process of internalisation in which visitors locate an object within their personal context, whilst *learning* suggests that interpretive text, exhibition designs and education props could enable visitors to acquire something new according to their personal interests and needs. In this research, the aim is to articulate a communicative model of material culture that will illustrate the sensual beauty of Chinese ceramics and connect them with contemporary society. Hence, I have considered a broader scope of object-human relationships than that which overlaps with learning *per se*.

However, I realise that my view on learning is, to a certain extent, in conflict with current museum notions of learning. The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) in the United Kingdom defines learning as 'a process of active engagement with experience' which would suggest personal growth in relation to skill, knowledge, awareness, inspiration and feelings (MLA 2004). Clearly, this notion is liberal and inclusive, in a sense akin to Dewey's definition of 'meaning making'. It underlies the government's strategy of promoting the museum as a provider of informal

education in a campaign for lifelong learning. A liberal interpretation of 'learning' is employed within this strategy to make it applicable to people from all walks of life. In contrast, I adopt Dewey's notion that learning is one dimension of meaning making, in order to highlight the diverse agendas of museum visits. As many empirical studies have shown, visitors come to museums for various reasons, such as entertainment, social gathering, or due to available time, and are not necessarily interested in learning (Jansen-Verbeke and van Rekom 1996; Falk, Moussouri and Coulson 1998; MORI 2001, 2004). More specifically, as my own initial studies suggested, visitors tend to be uninterested in making sense of Chinese ceramics, let alone in considering them as a subject of/for learning. In recognition of visitors' agendas and interests, then, a major concern of this research is to extend a short episode of meaning making into a continuum of experience that would reveal the multiple voices of objects and project different facets of humanity. In other words, the primary task of the interpretive approach I have developed is to facilitate visitors' processes of meaning making and encourage multi-dimensional intersection between objects and visitors' present and past personal experiences, and consequently to generate insights for the future.

Though interpretation devised from the proposed model may include learning about the culture and ceramic art, it is not my intention to promote learning through the collection. I perceive museum interpretation as a starting point for visitors to construct their own meanings in a process that is creative, enjoyable and above all personal. The process focuses on the human experiences, which encompass multi-dimensional intersections

between objects and visitors, such as sensory perception, cultural learning, aesthetic appreciation and free-flow association. Whilst learning theory perceives of the museum as a facilitator guiding visitors to learn at their own pace (Hooper-Greenhill 1999b: 21), the proposed model considers it as a powerhouse, which enables objects to speak to visitors who are not learners but partners with objects in a meaning-making process. Though personal meanings may deviate from those which a proposed interpretation intends, I am convinced that every individual meaning has some validity in its own right. By establishing a partnership with visitors, the museum would also learn about personal stories or creative associations, thus enriching its own interpretations of its collections. Hence, I justify my adoption of a relatively limited notion of learning as it emphasises that my communicative model of material culture is not meant to be an equal to an object-based approach of learning. Both theories are concerned with nurturing object-human communication. Fundamentally though, the difference is that the former requires museums to serve as a public forum that embraces, communicates and negotiates different voices, whilst the latter considers it as a treasure island where visitors are welcomed to explore their own 'jewels'.

Regardless of the different orientations of material culture and learning theories, discussions on museum learning have much to offer in considering the craft of interpretation, especially in addressing visitors' interest and needs. What learning theories underpin is that engagement and exploration are critical in triggering visitors' interest to learn and therefore, in fostering their interactions with an exhibit. As Falk and

Dierking (2000: 195-196) suggest, learning occurs effortlessly when visitors feel connected with their life experiences. Museums are, therefore, an ideal venue for learning in that they can offer multi-sensory facilities such as period rooms, computer interactives and objects with graphic panels, which encourage visitors to experience the 'reality' neatly, dramatically and most importantly, authentically. Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson (1999: 154-155) also hold that in order to promote learning, visitors should be equipped in such a way that they can associate the museum's presentation with their own concerns, and they argue that multi-sensory stimulation is one of the intrinsic motivations to serve these ends. They imply that visitors' meaning-making processes should be dynamic so that they include sensory illumination, intellectual understanding and emotional affection. Taking the visual-dominated presentation of museums into account, this finding is insightful, in that it pinpoints people's experiences, especially sensory and emotional affection, as the cornerstone of museum communication. However, Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson appear to be satisfied that the museum would provide multi-sensory aids in enhancing, rather than overturning, essentially visual interpretation – an interpretation which may reduce a tangible object to visual narration and thus, to some extent, inhibit visitors' engagement with the actual material object.

There is no doubt that museums should offer multi-sensory means to create a welcoming space in facilitating visitors' processes of meaning making. It is critical that this sensory mode of communication should also include material culture – the heart of an exhibit. Instead of 'looking' – a rather detached and rational mode of interaction, I argue that the

object-human relationship should revolve around 'people's experience', a more sensuous interaction that would magnify materiality and consequently foster individual meanings. Hence, I propose a model of material culture that positions a tactile mode of looking at its core in an attempt to connect visitors with collections in a sensual, affectionate and creative manner. By re-enacting people's experiences through museum text, illustrations or other interpretive means, this approach invites visitors to feel an object as an embodiment of people from the past, and to look at it as if meeting a friend. In addition, I draw on aspects of learning theories which suggest that visitors' prior knowledge and interests should be incorporated into museum interpretation, thus enabling collections to be relevant to contemporary society. This visitor-oriented strategy broadened the scope of my research and led to my conducting visitors' studies in order to fully embrace the idea of museum collections as 'object-human manifolds'. It has also shaped my interpretive model into a sensible platform integrating material culture analysis with visitors' experiences in order to explore different voices in a museum context.

How would an interpretive approach of material culture accommodate visitors' interests and prior knowledge? I now turn to empirical aspects of my research and discuss the design of my fieldwork.

1.6 Working with visitors and museums

In constructing a model of material culture for audiences, I undertook ethnographic studies in the Schiller Gallery at the Bristol City Museum (BCM) and the Museum of East Asian Art in Bath (MEAA), each for a

period of five months. I adopted ethnographic studies, a set of research methods, that enabled me to participate in the research sites for an extended period of time, in order to examine how various forms of object-human communication mechanism actually operate in exhibition contexts, through the unique lens of insider/outsider (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 1-2; Miller 1997: 17). The tasks of the fieldwork were to enquire into how institutional cultures shape object-human communication and visitors' perceptions of the Chinese collections and their opinions on the museum's interpretations of the collection; these data consequently informed the proposed model for nurturing object-human communication (figure 1.2).

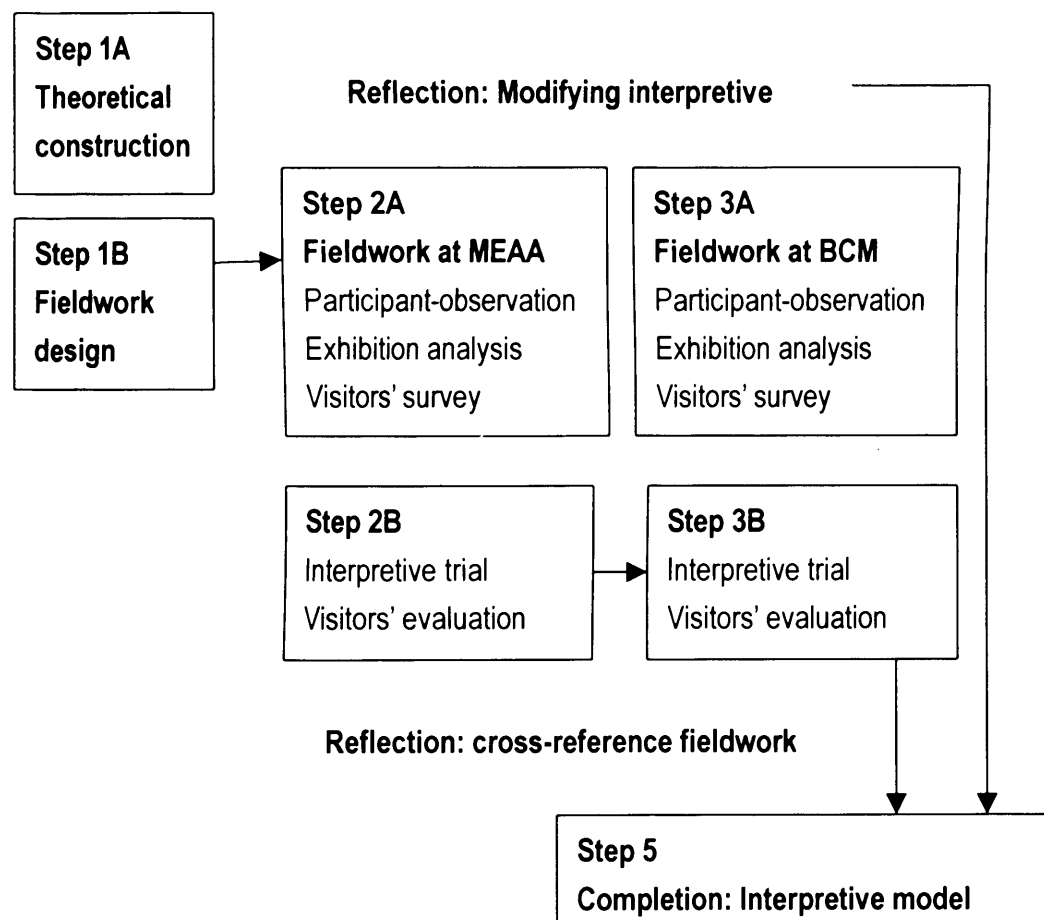


Figure 1.2 Circular Process of Fieldwork Design (modified after Mason 2002: 72)

The BCM and MEAA proved to be appropriate research sites for investigating how a wide range of visitors interact with Chinese ceramics.⁴ According to my pilot studies, visitors from these two sites found it difficult to associate with the collections. However, BCM is an example of an integrated museum where visitors may have limited contextual knowledge of, or little interest in, the Chinese collection; whilst MEAA serves as a specialised institution, drawing visitors who are interested in East Asian cultures, who tend to have some prior knowledge of, or personal contact with, the cultures. I am aware that categorising these museums by the scope of their collections may overlook the different interpretive approaches they have adopted in line with their institutional missions and agendas. However, this categorisation takes visitors' responses to the exhibitions into account, and therefore sheds light on how visitors may be better enabled to experience objects on display. Many empirical studies suggest, visitors' engagement with objects is closely related to personal interests, prior knowledge and visiting agendas (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990; Falks and Dierking 1992: 3-14; Hein 1998b; Black 2005: 22-36). Therefore, conducting ethnographic research in these two museums had wider implications for considering how museums could facilitate object-human relationships in a cross-cultural context.

⁴ On a practical level, these two research sites were selected because the institutions were able to accommodate the field studies in terms of the curators' schedules, museum events and suitable exhibition spaces. In July 2005, I started sending letters to 20 museums asking permission to undertake fieldwork in their galleries. I received only four responses from the curators. As I had been a student intern in the BCM, Kate Newnham, the curator, was positive about my research proposal. Ailsa Laxton, the curator of the MEAA, also welcomed the undertaking of the research. Jane Wilkinson from the National Museum of Scotland and Emma Leighton from the Burrell Collection expressed an initial interest in the research project, however eventually turned down the request due to a time clash with their schedule.

These two case studies were also strategically significant in terms of representing western scholarship and connoisseurship of Chinese art, and museological concerns of approaching other cultures. The BCM collection is a result of Ferdinand Schiller's 25 years of collecting in the early 20th century (BCM 2003), and part of its gallery interpretation demonstrates the early development of western connoisseurship and scholarship of Chinese art whilst some more contemporary displays show a shift in interpretation from an artistic perspective to an appreciation of the cultures. On the other hand, the MEAA represents Chinese art collected from the latter half of the 20th century. Its commitment to art and cultural education offers another museological view of fusing connoisseurship with popularised sinology for understanding the collection as well as the cultures. To summarise, the historical courses on the collections and their interpretation strategies would find their counterparts within the profession, and this implies that these two case studies ground my model and grant it a certain degree of generality in considering the wider issues of museum communication.

1.6.1 Participant-Observation

To gain access into the research sites as an insider, I volunteered as a curatorial assistant working in each of the selected museums. This insider/outsider role was critical in allowing me more freedom to observe interactions among staff, institutional cultures and events in their 'natural setting', enabling me to transform indiscernible routines into a process of registering, recoding and interpreting (Gans 1982: 54; Denscombe 1998:140). The focus of my participant-observation was on museum interpretive strategies, curatorial preferences, and institutional perceptions

of object-human communication, and I gradually formulated an overview of museum practicalities and enquired into visitors' reception of the Chinese ceramics. Entering the field as a stranger, I was acutely aware of my academic and ethnic background, both of which could have been unwelcome to some museum professionals and visitors and so raised cultural and linguistic barriers. Yet my role as a researcher was not meant to be that of a detached critic, but of a humble, self-reflective learner attempting to learn from people's perceptions and experiences and the reasons beneath them, in order to enhance the feasibility of my proposed model.

1.6.2 Exhibition analysis

While my use of participant-observation sought an insider's experience of the research sites, exhibition analysis critically reviewed the museums' interpretations in historical context. The analysis underlines the function of text and images in relation to an interpretive context to examine how messages are constructed through the organisation of language and images (Gill 2000: 174-175). Examining the exhibitions as a whole by investigating what objects, language, images and interpretive aids, including education props and hand-on activities, were present and absent, what the function of these communication tools were and how messages were constructed, enabled me to develop a more objective overview of interpretation in the museums. To decipher the museums' interpretation strategies, I devised a set of criteria for scrutinising the functions of text, images and other interpretive aids, and for analysing their organisation in relation to object-human relationships in an exhibition context (figure 1.3).

Text	Images & other interpretive aids
<p><i>Narration</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the text relate to an object? • What is being described? How is it being constructed? What kind of language / terminology is used? Why? • What is present and absent? What is the perception governing these? 	<p><i>Presentation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do the interpretive aids relate to the collection? • What is being highlighted? Why? • What kinds of visual strategies are employed? How are sensuous, emotional or intellectual attributes being conveyed? • What is present and absent? What is the principle governing these?
<p><i>Judgement</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the statement? How is it being constructed? • Is there anything to warrant the statement? 	<p><i>Contextualisation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is being contextualised? Why? • What kinds of visual / tactile strategies are employed?
<p><i>Overall impression</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it engaging in sensual, intellectual, or emotional terms? • To what extent is the interpretation helpful in fostering object-human communication? • How do different means of communication support each other? How are these attributions being organised? • What is the underlying perception of the object-human relationship? 	

Figure 1. 3 Criteria for textual analysis

This set of criteria is not intended to imply that sensory aids, such as images or hands-on props, share a similar static structure or grammar to language. Rather, it constituted an attempt to analyze how museum interpretation proposes, to visitors, a specific mode of looking in relation to the collections. The result was also used to review how museum messages might be re-interpreted by visitors in the context of an alternative interpretive approach.

1.6.3 Visitor surveys

In accommodating visitors' interest and communication needs, visitor surveys were conducted in order to enquire into visitors' interpretive strategies in relation to the Chinese collections. The survey included observations of visitors' participation in the exhibition, and an opinion poll asking visitors to choose their favourite objects. According to my preliminary investigations, visitors appeared to show limited interest and resources in looking at the collections because of cultural barriers. It seemed two research methods would be necessary to gather considerable data for exploring, in-depth, visitors' interests, perceptions and thoughts.

First, I spent a period of 14 days in each of the museums respectively, observing how visitors interacted with the collections and what they were most interested to explore in the exhibitions. The observations took place in the ceramic gallery at MEAA and the Schiller Gallery at BCM. These specific galleries were chosen because (i) the display in the MEAA ceramic gallery covers a wide range of themes, including art history, cultural facts, symbolism, and figures and stories, some of which are popular among visitors, as I had previously observed; and (ii) the Schiller Gallery is the only exhibition of Chinese art in the BCM. During my observations, I recorded details of every visitor, including the date and time of their visit; the total time they spent in the gallery; the route followed and stops made; and their visible reactions to the exhibition. This method of data collection was conducted in a detached and structured manner in order to outline visitors' behaviour patterns in looking at the collection. However, I realised

that the results may lack ethnographic 'thickness' in putting visitors' behavior into perspective (Bryman 2004: 177). In order to avoid observer's bias, I also employed an opinion poll to glean the essence of object-human relationships in these contexts, and triangulated the results through informal conversations with visitors during museum events and activities.

Second, I undertook an opinion poll inviting visitors to vote for their favourite objects. For reasons of practicality, this enquiry was based on two different sources: 198 visitors' commentaries from the People's Choice event collected in the MEAA, and 158 semi-structured interviews at the Schiller gallery. People's Choice, an exhibition of people's favourite objects from the Museum's collection, opened at the MEAA on 26th April 2005. Prior to the exhibition, the MEAA invited visitors, Museum Friends, staff, and trustees, as well as local and national personalities, to choose their favourite objects and share their interpretations with others on them. Some of these interpretations were then used as exhibition text, providing insights into how people view, understand and enjoy East Asian Art and culture. I justify using this data because of the difficulties in gathering sufficient information from interviews. When I first entered the museum, I found that visitors tended to underestimate the time they would spend in the gallery and they could, therefore, spare limited time for a proper interview. I tried approaching some visitors; however, they were inclined to make brief statements without much clarification. In the Schiller gallery, on the other hand, many objects on display do not have a label showing their common name and museum number. This lack of information made it difficult for visitors to communicate what their favourite object was, let alone engaged

them long enough in the exhibition to write down their thoughts. Therefore, I spent 20 days at the site interviewing visitors on their favourite things, in January 2007. Most visitors agreed to participate on initially entering the gallery, though only about 70% of them would come back to do the interviews. The rest either found no objects of interest or left while I was engaged with other visitors.

To make sense of visitors' commentaries, I coded each of the statements into topics under three major themes: perceptual response, socio-cultural context and technical concerns. For each topic, I examined why visitors acknowledged a particular category, how they associated with it, what kinds of wordings were used and how the topic was related to other categories. In addition, I used multi-coding to reflect the inter-relationships among various topics in order to demonstrate the complexity of visitor experiences. The analysis of the data was informed by empirical studies on museum aesthetic experiences done by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and Hooper-Greenhill (2001a, 2001b).

1.6.4 Interpretive trials and evaluation

The first phase of the fieldwork examined how the conventional museum mode of object-human interaction is constructed, and explored the mechanism of visitors' meaning-making processes in relation to the collections. The findings were fed into the development of the proposed model for bridging the communicative gap between Chinese ceramics and visitors. As part of the circular process, interpretive trials and evaluation were then organised in order to reflect upon visitors' reception of the

approach.

The interpretive trials were conducted through interactive workshops of three to twelve visitor participants, in which they discussed alternate interpretive themes or looked at specific objects creatively, as my model suggested. The trials were designed to be a friendly discussion forum with focused themes, enquiring into visitors' opinions on the proposed new mode of object-human communication. Keeping each session within 90 minutes, I used these workshops as a form of focus group, encouraging visitors' in-depth exchanges (Kreuger 1988: 18). In the MEAA, the trials were promoted as special programme; visitors volunteered if they were interested in East Asian culture or art. At the BCM, in contrast, the museum considered the trials to be part of their outreach project, and therefore the participants were recruited through adult colleges within the city and so had no prior knowledge or interest in the subject. Nonetheless, both groups of participants recognised that the trials were part of my research project and were willing to contribute. Although the recruitment method may have affected the focus group dynamics, I argue that this convenience sampling was appropriate because it corresponded with the museums' different missions.

To evaluate visitors' responses, each session of the interpretive trials was documented. At the MEAA, the organisation and the participants consented to have the sessions recorded and transcribed. However, the BCM were concerned about privacy issues and disapproved of audio recording. With the consent of the groups, I took field notes immediately

after each session and also asked another moderator to help with note-taking and to try to capture exact phrases and statements made by the participants. In addition, evaluation forms were distributed in the sessions in an attempt to understand visitors' reception of the workshops. The advantages of using this form of enquiry are that it is personal, less intimidating and free of language barriers, which may include views visitors would feel uncomfortable sharing with other participants (Berger 2000: 191-193). I realise that this evaluation was far from comprehensive in terms of data collection; however, the fieldwork was intended to be formative, in informing the proposed model, and the evaluation was therefore a reflective mechanism that assessed the feasibility of the interpretive model. It is beyond the scope of this research to conduct a summative evaluation of the model, as the interpretive trials were modest in scale and maturity, both practically and theoretically. It is hoped that this research will serve as a starting point in considering how museums could facilitate object-human communication sensuously and how museum-based studies could participate in material culture discussions.

1.7 Shape of this research

Gombrich proclaims that, 'There is no such thing as art. There are only artists' (2006: 5). Though this statement is not without exaggeration, it is probably one of the best answers in explaining why material culture studies bother about things. It emphasises the fact that an artwork has only a 'deadly presence' if we fail to understand that it is an embodiment of multiple conversations between the artist, a medium and the artistic tradition, that enables us to experience afresh formal qualities such as

texture, colour and line. When a work of art leaves the artist's studio, it is nothing if the viewer fails to attribute meaning to it and to co-create what it could be. In the museum context – a place for celebrating the significance of material culture – art exists in the ways that the institution interprets and that visitors perceive. Hence, museum objects can be considered as object-human manifolds, a sensuous form of communication transmitting messages across temporal and spatial distance.

Based on this presumption, this study intends to construct a museological approach of material culture, which enables objects to speak, and consequently engages visitors in an exploration of what the collection would mean to them. Chinese ceramics from the BCM and MEAA are the focus of this proposed approach because these two case studies are typical examples demonstrating how conventional interpretations risk isolating museum collections from people. I have attempted to bring different aspects of museum work together in considering the nature of museum objects and visitors' meaning-making processes, and the mechanism of object-human communication.

Drawing on the findings of the case studies, I argue that miscommunication occurs when interpretations impose certain modes of object-human interaction, which are disconnected from people's bodily and personal experiences. As shown in figure 1.4, I propose a communicative approach of material culture that incorporates visitors' studies into decorative art researches in order to find the links between audience and objects. Seated at the core of this proposed object-human relationship is a

tactile mode of looking that posits the object as a form of human agent, which benefits from being experienced, rather than being looked at. In addition to practical museum experience, I appeal to philosophical thought, museum literature, and its construction of knowledge and meaning making, anthropological research on material culture and materiality, and art theories.

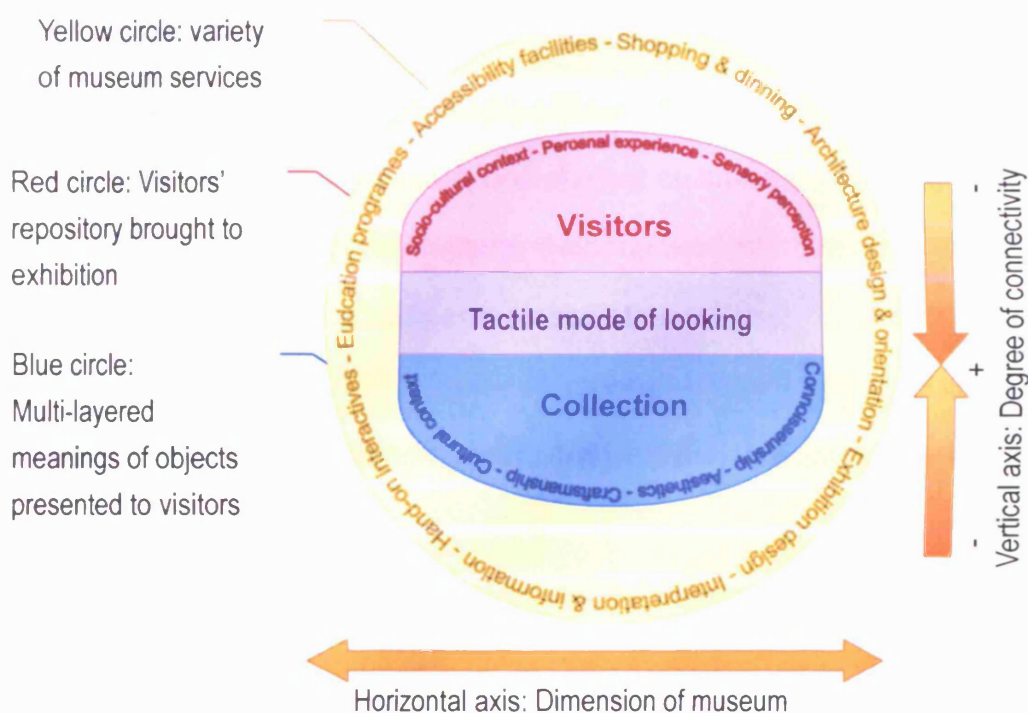


Figure 1.4 Model for a communicative approach of material culture

This study is not concerned with the wider issues of studying Chinese decorative art, connoisseurship and aesthetics. Certainly, I am inspired by much of the literature in considering the significance of Chinese ceramics in relation to contemporary society (Clunas 1991; Li 1981). However, my primary concern is how to employ these studies into the communication of

objects with visitors, rather than explore new ways of studying decorative art. In addition, although many learning programmes informed the organisation of my interpretive trials (Durbin 1996; Paris 2002), as I have explained, my proposed approach tries to address broader issues of communication and meaning making than just learning alone. Still less is my model concerned with promoting cultural diversity, social inclusion or understanding of a particular culture in the museum context. In researching into Chinese ceramics and its links with visitors, I do touch upon discussions relating to the role of the museum, cross-cultural communication and representations of other culture. Essentially, Chinese ceramic arts constitute an on-going dialogue between tradition and innovation, locally, regionally and across other cultures – including Islamic, European and South East Asian – which can be best understood in the wider context of human heritage. Having another life in museums – memorial sites for things – I am convinced that Chinese ceramics have a wealth of stories to tell us about who we are, where we come from and how we are connected with others. Therefore, my museological model should consider a range of broader issues in embracing the dynamic and richness of the materiality of the objects concerned.

In trying to speak for material culture, and consequently enhance its connection with a wider audience, like the research process itself, this thesis is structured as a circular process starting from practical concerns, passing on to theoretical construction, and finally evaluating the model in real life contexts. This introductory chapter has set out the parameters of the research by outlining the nature of museological material culture and

interrelations between objects, visitors' meaning-making processes and museum interpretation. It has also introduced the Schiller gallery at BCM (an integrated museum) and MEAA (a site dedicated to East Asian art), indicating the empirical dimension of this theoretical enquiry. To address the challenges of museum communication, Chapter Two critically reviews different interpretative approaches employed by the BCM and MEAA, and the modes of object-human relationship they imply. Turning from the communication medium to its recipient, Chapter Three analyses visitors' studies at the research sites in order to explore how visitors' attitudes, perceptions and knowledge in relation to the Chinese collection inform their reception of museum interpretation. I argue that regardless of the efforts museums make to connect with the audience, they tend to impose a rather static way of looking which ignores the sensations and personal experiences an object would have embodied. As bodily experience and materiality is one and the same concept in establishing reciprocal dialogue with an object, Chapter Four blends discussion of phenomenology and agency theory into an alternate framework of interpreting objects. It argues that objects can be understood as a form of human agency that highlights the sensations, feelings, and personal experiences an object may communicate. Bringing the theoretical perspective into the museum context, Chapter Five proposes interpretive principles that empower an object to speak of human experiences through its perceptual qualities, in order to advocate a tactile communication between objects and visitors. Chapter Six is a reflective documentary introducing two experimental projects at the BCM and MEAA, which demonstrate the practical implications of my interpretive model. Though the findings validate the

feasibility of the model in developing a creative approach to object-human communication, they also pose questions, such as how museums might collaborate with visitors in an exploration of the meanings of objects and determine to what extent personal meanings are valid and to whom they are meaningful.

Material culture studies is an interesting field that is currently witnessing an emphasis on the body, the senses and materiality, and which recognises some of our basic needs in relation to, in pursuit of, and even in denial of, objects. However, there is only a handful of studies related to museum material culture (Pearce 1989, 1994; Moore 1997; Bouquet 2001; Prown 2001) and even fewer devoted to theorising object-human communication in exhibitions (Pearce 1992; Stewart 1993; Barker 1999). This thesis is an effort to contribute to this gap. Although museum objects appear to have little utilitarian significance, they are of potential significance to everyone in the contemporary world because they give us a sense of our place in relation to a wider world of human heritage.

Chapter 2

Exhibiting China in Museums

2.1 Interpreting ceramics



Figure 2.1 Bi-disc (2nd shelf far left) is considered a favourite object in the Museum of East Asian Art, Red bi-disc, Neolithic period, c. 3000-2000 BCE, 16cm D (By Ting W Y V, 9 May 2007)

In the Museum of East Asian Art (MEAA) at Bath, *bi*, a jade disc with a perforated opening in the centre, is put under the spotlight (figure 2.1). It is a visually modest artefact made of russet-coloured jade infused with hues of reddish brown. Like many of its kind from the Neolithic period, archaeologists have no clear idea whether a *bi* was a device for astronomy, a ritual item or a weapon. Its minimal design and ambiguous history seem to resist further dialogue with exhibition visitors as they go on to be

surrounded by objects showing intriguing decoration or exquisite craftsmanship. Interestingly, the museum presents this *bi* in one of the largest display cases, and situates it in the core section of the jade gallery. It is exhibited alongside smaller burial objects and two bi-discs in different forms; it is one of the oldest objects representing the Neolithic jade cultures of China. The museum's interpretation enables a simple object like this to 'speak' to visitors. A visitor considers it his/her favourite object 'for its beauty and simplicity of form and for the mystery that surrounds its significance as a tomb treasure. Above all for its amazing age' (J059). Taking clues from the museum text and the exhibition setting, the visitor aestheticises the formal qualities of this bi-disc and associates it with historical mystery. To him/her, this object embodies archaic simplicity and offers a glimpse of ancient culture as far back as 5,000 years.



Figure 2.2 Bowl-like vessels displayed in the Schiller gallery
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)

In contrast to this explicit interpretive strategy, the Schiller gallery at the Bristol City Museum (BCM) presents the Chinese collection with limited interpretation, thereby distinctively emphasising its 'otherness' to visitors. For instance, there are a considerable number of bowl-shaped vessels on display, and yet there is no information to explain whether an object is there for aesthetic purposes, or to demonstrate the different uses of these porcelain wares, such as tea ceremonies or the rituals of ancestor worship (figure 2.2). An observant visitor describes these objects as 'rice bowls', and concludes that such a juxtaposition aims to show that 'Chinese people are big rice-eaters' (17 November 2006). Regardless of the forms of interpretation an exhibition offers, visitors believe that the museum, as an authoritative cultural institution, embeds intellectual rationale into its assemblage of objects. As a result, visitors perceive the collection to be educational material showing certain aspects of Chinese culture – aspects which each visitor then interprets according to their own prior knowledge.

As Sharon MacDonald (1999: 269) suggests, the museum exhibition is a 'technology of imagination', where sensory and cognitive stimuli enable visitors to make sense of the collection and to develop, reshape or validate their knowledge. While the museum uses the collection, and its juxtapositions and setting, to convey meanings, visitors bring their own attitudes, perceptions and knowledge in making sense of their museum experiences. In other words, a museum is a cultural site promoting a 'detached' mode of looking, where its collection and visitors establish a 'meaningful' dialogue without tactile contact. When they look at an object in the exhibition, visitors receive the museum's interpretive clues, and,

consequently, co-construct its message through association, sharing and participation (Hooper-Greenhill 1994). Hence material culture is not a singular 'objective presence', but a object-human manifold mediating between the museum's interpretation, the perceptual qualities of objects, and visitors' personal thoughts.

This chapter examines how a museum might facilitate this object-human relationship in an exhibition setting. I focus on the BCM and MEAA case studies in order to evaluate how museums frame visitors' understanding of Chinese collections. I provide some of the background to the interpretation of Chinese collections at the BCM and MEAA, and in the process reflect upon a museum's role in communicating material culture to its audience. By outlining their establishment, missions, and interpretive strategies, I review how these sites frame visitors' understanding of the collections. I suggest that museums tend to magnify the aesthetic values of Chinese objects or to contextualise them as being representative of Chinese culture in an attempt to bridge cultural differences. There is no doubt that these approaches have value; however, as we shall see they also risk encouraging visitors to study museum interpretation instead of looking at the object *per se*. In consequence, these interpretive approaches suggest that the object-human relationship is static, detached and rational. I argue that by disconnecting objects from visitors' physical and daily life experiences, this mode of looking renders museum experiences analogous to reading a textbook, so inhibiting objects from speaking to visitors in their tactile language.

2.2 Bristol City Museum and its interpretive mosaic

Opened in 1905, the Bristol City Museum (BCM) oversees collections ranging from archaeology, natural history and decorative art, exemplifying disciplinary expertise to its visitors. In 1946, Ferdinand Schiller's collection of Chinese art was donated to the BCM by his brother Max Schiller and an entire gallery was dedicated to it, named after the benefactor. Since then, Schiller's collection has been under the care firstly of the decorative art department and then, after 1965, the Eastern art department (initially known as the Oriental department). As one of the most important private collections of Chinese art in the United Kingdom, it was considered to be 'a notable addition' to the city's artistic treasures (Schubart 1948:3). The museum's Chinese collections were subsequently and gradually strengthened through contemporary collections and donations from other collectors, such as George Warre, Gordon Bryan and Lord Dulverton (For collection summary, please refer to appendix A1). Nowadays, the Eastern art department takes care of more than 8,000 objects from China, Japan, India and the Islamic world. Recently, the department has secured some limited resources in order to attempt to accommodate the needs of a wider audience. Changes in the Schiller gallery, however, still indicate an approach characteristic of early Western connoisseurship.

2.2.1 Schiller's collection and the connoisseurs' interpretation

It is difficult to determine when British collectors started to assemble Chinese art. Since the 16th century, luxury commodities from China, such as ivories, silk and porcelains, have been imported to Britain (Honour 1961: 36-44; Howard 1999: 45-46). This vogue absorbed Chinese luxuries into

British material life as part of architectural displays as well as to serve a practical function in daily life (Pierson 2007: 52-57). Whether it was blue and white Kraak-wares decorated with scenery designs, or watercolour paintings showing the festive customs of Chinese people, these objects were not categorised as proper artwork for studying Chinese culture but as curios offering a fantasy view of a remote civilisation. It was not until the late 18th century, when tensions in the Sino-British relationship led to military operations, that more 'authentic' Chinese art objects from the imperial court were brought to Britain and subsequently inspired an interest in understanding Chinese art systematically.

As a collector of Chinese art in the early 20th century, Ferdinand Schiller (1866–1938) may be viewed as one of those pioneers who seriously considered their collection choices, rationale and categorisation in order to understand non-Western objects from the objects' cultural perspective (Clunas 1998: 47; Pierson 2007: 170). Schiller's collection demonstrates a comprehensive range of ceramic wares from the Neolithic period (4000-2500BCE) to the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), along with jades and bronzes. This reflects an interesting categorisation of 'Chinese art' which overlaps painting, the most celebrated form of fine art in the West, with decorative art such as ceramics, bronzes and jades (Clunas 1998: 47). Unlike many collectors of his time, Schiller shared the conventional European sensibilities for decorative painted export wares from the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing dynasties, but was also aware of Chinese intellectual taste for plain monochromes, especially the white and celadon wares from the Tang (618-960) and Song (960-1279) dynasties (Schubart

1948: 5-7). These monochrome wares are perceived by Chinese scholar collectors as the best representation of art, but did not gain much recognition in the UK until Stephen Bushell, one of the first British scholars studying Chinese art, Sir Percival David, the renowned collector and sinologist, and Bernard Leach, the prominent studio potter, promoted a study of their perfect forms and refined qualities (Green 2000: 45-46; Pierson 2000: 64-65). Being eclectic in his approach to the very different aesthetic notions of China, Schiller's collection embraces two very different constructions of Chinese art: the decoration-oriented studies of symbolism and stories, and the formalistic appreciation of forms and colours. Schubart, a contemporary of Schiller's and fellow member of the Oriental Ceramic Society (OCS), complemented Schiller as a discriminating collector who tried to balance aesthetic interest as well as scholarship (Schubart 1948:5).

In approaching Chinese art, Schiller put great emphasis on classification and identification in outlining the evolution of genres and production techniques (Pierson 2000: 60-62; Clunas 1998: 43-44). He used a set of technical terminology devised by Western scholars and connoisseurs, paying particular attention to forms. This seems to have been influenced by his Cambridge acquaintance, Roger Fry, whose notion of 'significant form' demonstrates an early academic attempt to understand non-Western art in a universal context (BCM 2003). Renouncing historical context, Fry suggested that viewers look for the formal qualities of an object to coordinate with and submerge into sensuous feeling (Green 2005: 90-91; Hardie 2003: 39-40). It is clear from Schiller's catalogues and

related documents, that he methodically documented his purchases, ordering them chronologically by dynastic period and then by purchase within each era. There is a detailed description of each item, giving details of the form, type of ware, compositional techniques, decoration, condition and height (Schiller 1931).

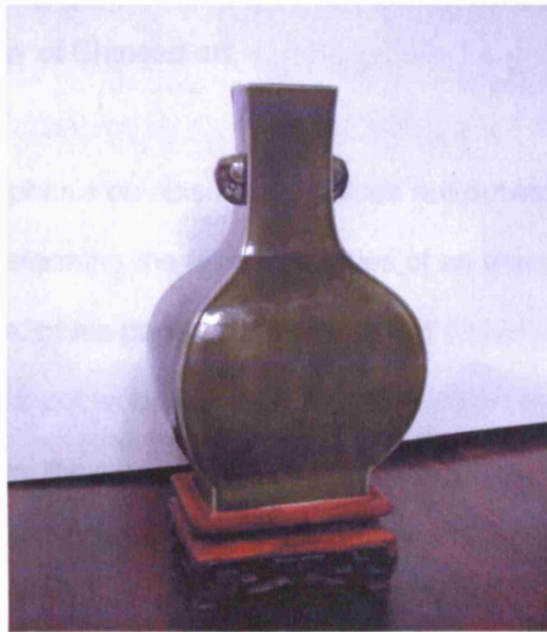


Figure 2.3 Tea-dust glazed vase, Qing dynasty, early 18th century, 25cm H
(By Ting W Y V, 18 June 2007)

According to one of the transactions of the OCS, he presented a tea-dust glazed vase to his fellow members as follows (figure 2.3):

‘The vase is quadrilateral but bottle-shaped, with a swelling body and straight narrow neck with elephant-mask handles. The paste is a white porcelain as seen at the foot rim, which shows the presence of iron in a red patch on the edge. ... The glaze is an olive green and is

felspathic, in which many bubbles occlude ...' (OCS 1923: 13).

Giving a detailed description of the formal qualities of the vase, Schiller referred its form and the manner of its glazing to similar objects from various periods and concluded that it is a 'specimen' from the Ming court (*ibid*). Indeed, studying the provenance of such a specimen enabled him to develop a typology of Chinese art.

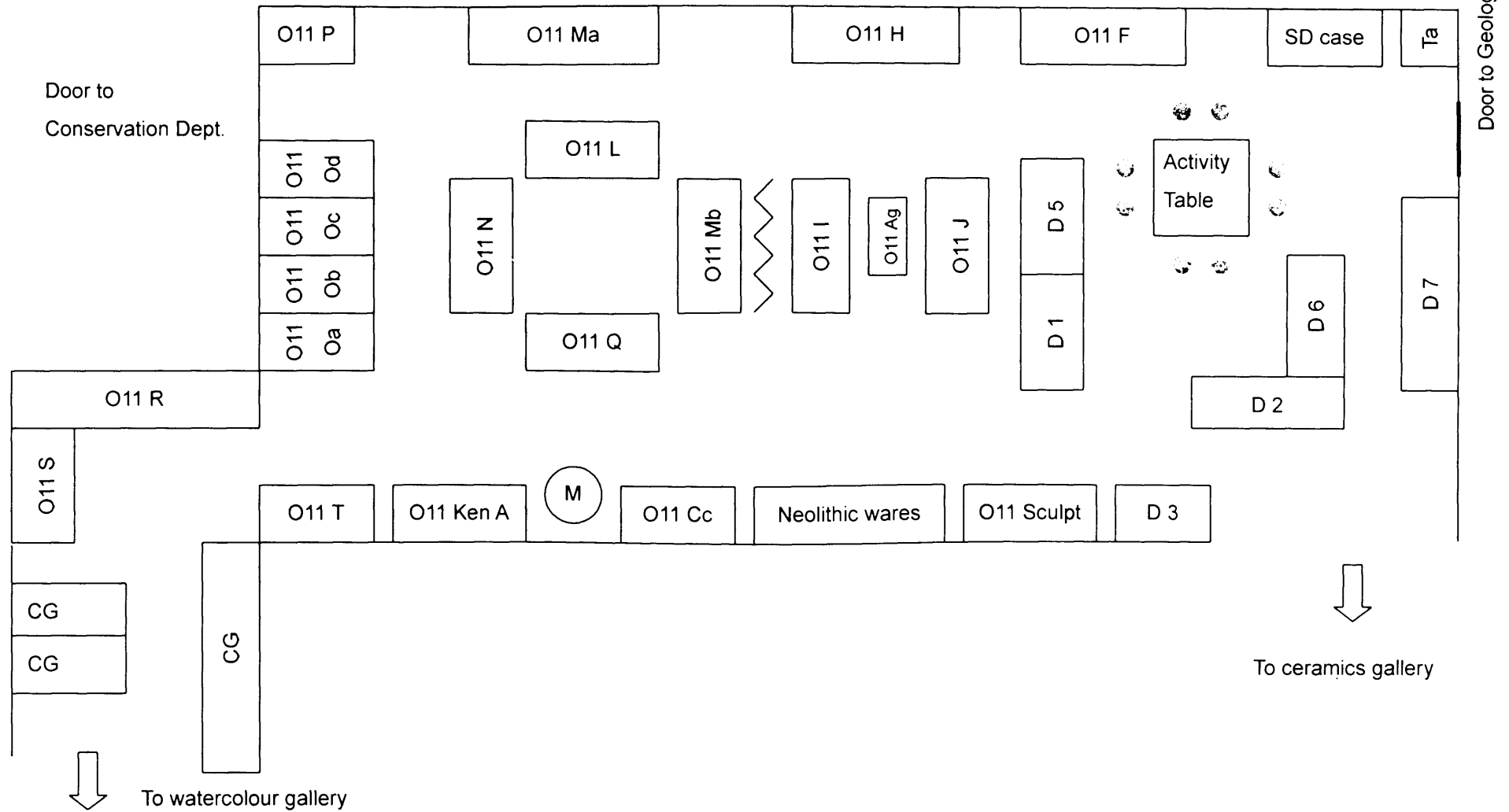
Schiller's emphasis on classification does not outweigh his aesthetic concern with transforming the formal qualities of an object *per se* into poetic imagination. In his paper, 'On Being a Pot' (1924), he suggests that looking closely at a pot would reveal 'the nature of the pot's own feelings'. He then associates the manner in which the glaze bursts into bubbles with a tree growing into leaf, which can be understood as a pursuit of finding expression (*ibid*). This interplay of 'objective identification' and poetic association shows that Schiller is interested in exploring the object, or ceramic art, in its own right. His study of Chinese art concentrates less on the function and cultural significance of an object than on its form and the making of an aesthetic judgement thereof. Informed by Fry's formalism, Schiller looked at the object from a universal perspective, focusing interpretation around the technical aspects of the art itself. It is the beauty of objects that urged him to collect systematically, regardless of whether the material comes from China or Europe. In other words, this collector-connoisseur mentality frames a piece of Chinese ceramic as a specimen of the art, showing how the object comes into being technically and aesthetically.

It is obvious that the BCM has encapsulated Schiller's connoisseurship into its categorisation, contemporary exhibition setting and interpretation. The BCM catalogue, written in 1948 by his friend and fellow OCS member Al Hetherington, bears a striking resemblance to Schiller's documents. For example, the same tea-dust glazed vase Schiller mentioned in the OCS transaction is described by the BCM catalogue as:

'Vase of bottle shape with rectangular sides. Two elephant handles on upper neck, covered with an olive-green glaze: Ming dynasty. H. 10" Plate XII N2603' (Schubart 1948: 22).

Written in a concise manner, the BCM catalogue associates formal qualities with the vase, instead of simply using a common name like 'vase' and relating it to its function. Unless the function of a piece is obvious, this formalistic approach tends to describe objects as 'flat jade slab of elongated form' (Schubart 1948: 17), 'depressed globular bowl' (*ibid* 34), or 'tea bowl of conical shape' (*ibid* 31). Looking through the 38-page catalogue, there is no entry mentioning stories or the cultural significance of a figure or a narrative motif, and only one note referring to the symbolism of a ritual item (*ibid* 17). The categorisation stresses form and shape, decoration and size, in order to identify date and the type of ware – and somehow overwhelm or exclude the piece's cultural context.

Fig 2.4 Floor plan for the Schiller gallery



Keys


Dragon from the East (Exhibition launched in 2000)

- | | | | |
|-----|--------------------------|-----|---------------------------|
| D 1 | Dragon in other cultures | D 5 | Dragon and other cultures |
| D 2 | Dragon from the East | D 6 | Dragon and nature |
| D 3 | Imperial dragons | D 7 | Dragons through the ages |

Exhibition of Chinese collection

- O11 Ag Gilt bronze dish from Tang dynasty
- O11 Cc Ivory collection
- O11 F-H White and celadon wares from Tang to Yuen dynasties
- O11 I Black wares from Tang to Yuen dynasties
- O11 J Jun wares from Song to Yuen dynasties
- O11 Ken A Qing imitation of earlier production (Ding ware, Guan ware and Jun ware)
- O11 L Later Chinese metal work
- O11 Ma-Mb Blue and white wares from Ming dynasty
- O11 N White wares from Qing dynasty
- O11 Oa-Od & T Imperial production from the Qing dynasty in various styles
- O11 P Blue and white ware: contrasting style from the period of Longqing and Kangxi
- O11 Q Polychrome wares from Ming dynasty
- O11 R-S Enamel decorated wares from Qing dynasty
- O11 Sculpt. Buddhist sculptures

Others

-  Wooden screen from Ming dynasty
- CG Chinese glass gallery (exhibition launched 2006)
- M Blue and white plant pot from Ming dynasty
- Neolithic wares Neolithic wares from China
- Ta Tomb guardian, sculpture from Tang dynasty
- SD case Chinese military flag from the late 19th century

Even today, the early connoisseurship of Schiller's time is reflected in two thirds of the gallery space through the display of the development of Chinese ceramic wares and a modest collection of ivories and bronzes. In a gloomy exhibition space similar to that of a connoisseur's cabinet, the layout of the space is confusing (figure 2.4 and 2.5). There is no clear sign to indicate what items are on display, why things are put together in a particular order and why some objects are put behind display cases. My observations indicate that it is not uncommon for visitors to walk back and forth and eventually leave the gallery.



Figure 2.5 Overview of the Schiller gallery
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September, 2006)

In the glass display cases, each object, often placed on a wooden stand in pseudo-traditional Chinese style, is exhibited against a contrasting background. The objects are arranged broadly according to their genre or production period, but occasionally aesthetic factors disrupt the typo-temporal order. For instance, in order to trace technical development of the black-glazed wares from various kiln sites across the country, more than ten black tea bowls from the Song dynasty are displayed alongside two black-glazed jars from the mid-Tang dynasty (c. eighth century) and three miniature vases

from later periods (figure 2.6). However, with only one text label focusing on black tea wares and the cultural practices of tea drinking, it appears to the visitor that all of these objects were produced during the Song dynasty and somehow related to Chinese tea culture during that period. In contrast, a wall case predominantly presenting white vessels produced from different kiln sites during the 11th to 13th centuries, mixes in some 13th century celadon wares (figure 2.7), an arrangement that may be aesthetic in purpose, in order to flesh out these two pale-coloured monochromes. It is certainly confusing, as the display implies that these two genres are related in production techniques or kiln site location, which they are not. Worse still, there is no text panel to explain the rationale of such an assemblage. This arbitrary arrangement constructs an artificial rhetoric of objects linking each piece by its formal qualities, such as colour or glazing method, thus celebrating aesthetic values and the technical consummation of the art, but not the culture or makers who are involved in its construction. Embodying Schiller's connoisseurship, the implicit museum interpretation seems to struggle with scholarship and aesthetic considerations. It seems to conceive of the object-human relationship as personal and yet rational, in that visitors can allow the object to speak for itself, yet must contextualise it into an intellectual framework for connoisseurs. In other words, the gallery requires visitors to be connoisseur-collectors themselves, sharing similar prior knowledge and aesthetic tastes so that they may decipher the rationale of the display. The object is a connoisseur's specimen, constructing a typology within a universal context of art.



Figure 2.6 A display case showing the technical development of black wares from the 8th to 13th centuries
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)

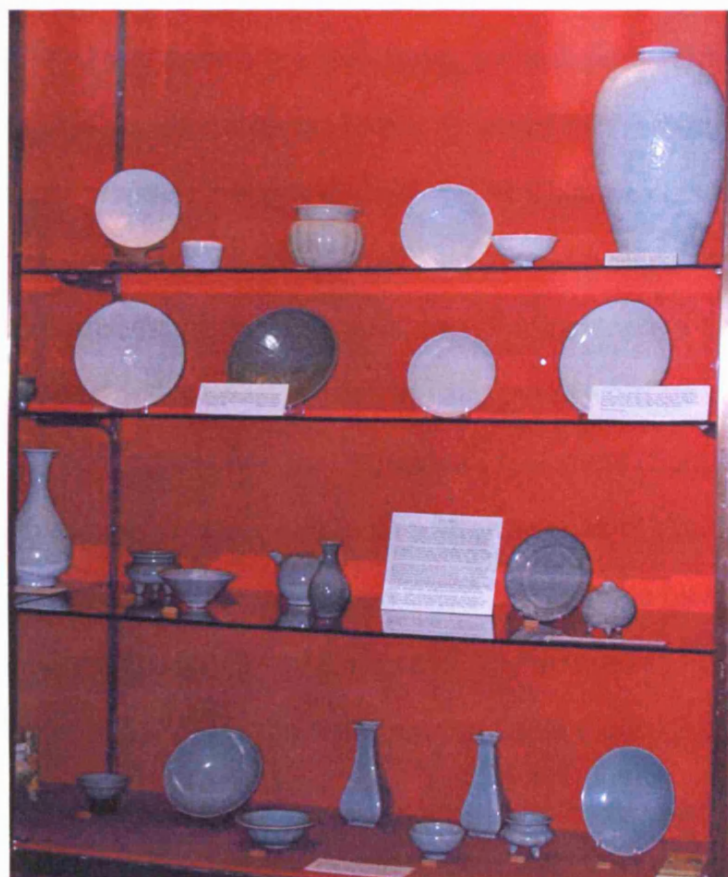


Figure 2.7 Aesthetic juxtaposition showing white ware with celadon bowls
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)



Figure 2.8 Pair of polychrome bowl and dish with floral designs,
Qing dynasty, early 17th century, 12cm D (bowl), 20cm D (dish)
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)

Most of the BCM text panels are technically loaded, detached and limited in translating the object's language to visitors. Devised by Western art historians, the terms used do not necessarily reflect Chinese classifications or descriptions of the aesthetics of ceramic art, and in some cases are even a crude translation borrowed from Oriental studies. For instance, a Song black tea ware is referred to as '*Tekmoku* ware', the Japanese word for black tea ware, which is not commonly used by Chinese art historians (Schubart 1948: 31). Obviously, the use of language reflects a strong sense of Western classificatory approaches; however, certain Chinese elements have been added to the interpretation to convey a sense of 'Chineseness'. For example, the museum text for a pair of polychrome bowl and dish (figure 2.8) states:

'Matching K'ang Hsi [Kangxi] porcelain. Blue underglaze pattern on the inside. Outside, polychrome cone-shaped fields of floral decoration, foiled against café-au-lait ground. Fine Lien Hua [Lianhua] (Lotus Blossom) mark. Early 18th century pieces.'

Interestingly the curator, following the Western convention of accurately describing the colour and the shape of decoration, uses the Chinese term, 'Kangxi', reign of the Emperor, referring to the period, and 'Lianhua' to the plant. The former term would be familiar to visitors with prior knowledge while the latter would implement a sense of 'otherness', but not necessarily enhance visitors' understanding of the culture or art. In fact, without any glossary, the use of Chinese terms is an obstacle in communicating with visitors. The BCM interpretation seems to suggest that the object-human relationship may operate through a common language and classification shared by connoisseurs and experts. Although Schiller's collection has been displayed in the public realm, its limited interpretation suggests it is an aesthetic specimen belonging to a private circle of curators, collectors and experts. Oscillating between aesthetic concern and scholarship, it is meant to enshrine the beauty of the objects by detailing classificatory information that doesn't impede visitors' personal associations. Nonetheless, it suggests a connoisseur mode of looking, which would be remote from many visitors' daily experiences; it also probably does very little to empower the collection to speak to a wider audience. In terms of communicating material culture to and with visitors, it does not explain the rationale of the exhibition, nor suggest what and how to look at the collection.

At its best, the connoisseur's interpretation would suggest to visitors that they should turn to the object *per se*. At its worst, its limited interpretation would frustrate visitors and eventually marginalise the collection as something mute, indecipherable and visually uninteresting. This is particularly

problematic for Chinese material culture. Cross-cultural barriers mean that visitors tend to look at the collection together with interpretive text, as I observed in the gallery. Hence, the object-human relationship depends heavily on museum interpretation, and with limited interpretation the dialogue is closed and private in the sense that it could be operated only via visitors' motivation and prior knowledge. In fact, Schiller's gallery is one of the quiet zones in the BCM. For more than half a century the Schiller collection, located at one of the remote areas in the museum, has been left physically and intellectually disconnected from most of the museum's visitors. Instead of serving as a connoisseur's specimen, it is more likely that the collection will remain an obscure curiosity in the background of the museum.

2.2.2 From connoisseurship to sinology

During 1950s, Chinese material culture has undergone a process of institutionalisation in the United Kingdom (Pierson 2007: 167-177). Many of Schiller's peer collectors started finding permanent homes for their collections, choosing ones that could help in shaping the public's understanding of Chinese art. For instance, Glasgow received Sir William Burrell's collection of over 9,000 works of art in 1944 and started building a museum at Pollok Country Park in 1967 (Pearce 2004). The British Museum and Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge shared Oscar Raphael's Chinese collection after his death in 1941 (Gray 1945: 276). More importantly, some private collections were integrated as part of university resources in fostering the development of Chinese art studies. In 1950, Sir Percival David donated his collection of Chinese ceramics and rare books to the University of London and the university converted a building at Bloomsbury Square to house the collection

for education and research purposes (Pierson 2007: 177). Opened to the public in 1960, the Oriental Museum in Durham houses the 'Right Honourable Malcolm MacDonald' and Hardinge's collection as teaching and research materials (Oriental Museum 2006). Paralleling the institutionalisation of Chinese material culture, the studies of Chinese art and archaeological objects became an independent discipline which departed from connoisseurship (Pierson 2007: 206-208). This process of specialisation also suggests that museum interpretation simultaneously shifted away from connoisseurship towards the new discoveries of disciplinary studies.

In the case of the BCM, the specialisation of Chinese material culture at first took place independently of the decorative art department and the appointment of its curators. Before that, Schiller's collection was under the charge of Hans Schubart, a well-trained painting conservator who was keen to further expand the collection. When the Oriental Art Department was established in 1965, it was managed by Dr Richard Hu See-Yee, an expert in Buddhism and Eastern art, for a few months before he took up a lecturing post in the United States. From 1967 to 1997, the post was filled by Peter Hardie who specialises in Chinese glass and Sino-Arabian exchange in relation to material culture. When one compares the catalogue of the Schiller Gallery published in 1948 to the present day display arrangement, it is clear that Hardie's professionalism lies in developing interpretive themes to justify the original juxtaposition and in enriching the displays with text panels. As a keen researcher, his interpretive text features catalogical entries outlining formal qualities of the objects, which would serve as notes for identification. In some cases, there are supplementary explanatory drawings from Chinese

classical texts and from recent literature in the field, used to share art historical facts with visitors.

For instance, his interpretive text on a yellow bowl from the Qing court reads:

'Bowl; porcelain; incised on the outside with two beardless dragons of classic Qing type above waves and mountains, separated by the jewel and four-fold cloud; base bears the authentic under-glaze blue seal mark of the Dao Guang Emperor (r. 1821-1850) of the Qing (Manchu) dynasty of China.

Yellow is the colour of the Centre and the Earth; and of the Emperor of China. Yellow dragons are the senior of the Four Dragons, say the Rui Ying Tu (a work lost by the C +6), and it was a yellow dragon that presented the Emperor Shun with the Diagram (of the Eight Trigrams: see our section on the View of Nature).'

By summarising the decorative features of this bowl, this catalogue style entry would help collectors or art historians to recognise the dragon motif as a sample of classic Qing type and to identify its date by the style of the reign mark inscribed on its base. To collectors or art historians, this is a valuable piece of information. However, to visitors with limited interest in or prior knowledge of the collection, it is not certain whether they would recognise a typical Qing dynasty dragon motif and be able to construct a typology of the decoration or monochromes as a whole. Unlike a connoisseur's interpretation from the earlier period of Schiller *et al.*, this text does not allow visitors to

make a free-flowing dialogue with the object. By explaining the symbolic meaning of a yellow dragon, it suggests that visitors should look at the relationship between the colour of the bowl and its decoration. To illustrate why the imperial court would make a decoration like this for the emperor, this brief paragraph is packed with the symbolism of the colour yellow and the dragon motif, and its relation to the Eight Trigrams, the mythical power of nature. These are supported by the Chinese ancient script, 'Rui Ying Tu', literally, *The Work of Divine Sign* and the legendary origin of the diagram. As the text does not further explain these concepts and the Chinese words, it is doubtful whether general visitors would be interested in reading the text and able to grasp its meanings fully; to do so requires an initial interest in or prior knowledge of the collection. It seems that the interpretive text aims to present authoritative information drawn from the original Chinese text, but has less concern with communicating with visitors. This would suggest the interpretation attempts to regulate a particular mode of looking – a sinologist's approach to objects, which magnifies the importance of disciplinary studies but hides or diminishes the intrinsic qualities of an object.

In fact, the interpretive text is written in a manner that suggests a pedagogical mode of the object-human relationship, operating through reading the text together with the object. Though the text is anonymous, one feels a dogmatic expert behind the scene, making claims that the dragon motif is a 'classic Qing type' and the reign mark to be 'authentic' without necessarily giving any validation. The curatorial authority embodied in the text imposes an 'art historian' approach on the collection and discourages personal and multi-layered meaning making. In addition, this expert may be enthusiastic in the

research, but the text is written in a rather detached and plain manner that is accessible to visitors with knowledge but does not invite them to explore and enjoy the object more closely. The text is an informative narration, but not a critical analysis. It points out the symbolic meaning of the dragon, but does not decipher the rationale of the symbolism, such as the cultural significance of the colour yellow, or the sensuous effect of the decoration in conveying the notion of royalty. Looking at a museum object with this kind of curatorial interpretation is, therefore, an intellectual activity that requires visitors to read the object as text. Interestingly, the label is also structured in a textbook manner that encourages visitors to refer the legend of the diagram to another section discussing the Chinese notion of nature. While the label reads like an authoritative textbook fixing the meaning of object in a particular cultural context, the resultant interference of different themes seems to imitate the act of reading so that one goes back and forth in the gallery as if flipping through different pages within a textbook. It is a form of interpretation in which the object-human relationship is a static mechanism in which the curator speaks for the collection rather than enabling the object to speak for itself. To a certain extent, then, the rise of specialisations framed objects primarily as tools for the construction of knowledge, and transformed object-human relationships into a knowledge-human dialogue.

2.2.3 Appreciation of cultures

In their shift from connoisseurship to sinology, museums became more conscious of their role as facilitator in bridging the gap between collections and visitors. To communicate Chinese material culture to wider audiences, museum interpretation has shifted again, from sinology to a more general

appreciation of objects and cultures. In response to museological concerns, the BCM has developed a new mission statement striving to provide an outstanding service that 'enables the people of Bristol and beyond to experience and enjoy diverse cultures and histories, and to understand the world and their place in it' (Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives 2006). This has been marked by the appointment of a new curator, Kate Newnham, who envisions the Schiller gallery as a community forum sharing a wide range of Eastern art objects with visitors (personal communication 4 October 2006). Since Newnham took up the post in 1998, she has been working closely with several stakeholders including researchers, community groups and schools to develop new interpretive ideas for promoting the better use of the Schiller collection.



Figure 2.9 Overview of the exhibition, 'Dragon from the East'
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)

In 2000, the Chinese year of the Dragon, Newnham launched a thematic exhibition, 'Dragons in the East', as part of a museum plan gradually to renovate the whole exhibition space. Focusing on the dragon, one of most

popular motifs of the Eastern cultures, the exhibition juxtaposes objects of diverse media, originating in different countries and produced in various time periods. Designed to create a visitor-friendly space, the dragon display uses a brightly coloured backdrop, well-structured labels and contemporary objects, such as Pokemon cards and dragon tattoos, to help visitors better associate with the collection (figure 2.9). Sliding doors were installed at the bottom of some of the display cases to create 'dragon caves' where contemporary artefacts in the form of dragons or decorated with dragon motifs are hidden, so that children may be involved in the exhibition. To engage visitors' participation, a crayon rubbing activity is also provided, while two boxes of children's books on dragons and Eastern cultures encourage parents to read with their children. These facilities suggest that a museum visit involves not merely looking at the collection, but participating in the exhibition through various activities. The dragon display can thus be understood as a friendly zone for learning about culture.

The display has been well received by families and schools, yet it raises questions of whether such a generalised approach to interpretation indicates a decline in academic standards – 'edutainment' rather than learning from the collection (Mintz 1994: 33). The edutainment facilities are certainly designed in such a way as to arouse visitors' interest in looking at the collection. However, as there are no obvious links between the collection and the edutainment props, the objects seem to be merely staging for the activity area. For instance, many visitors participate in the crayon rubbing activity to make an attractive picture of a dragon as a souvenir of the visit. Without the appropriate information from the museum, they are predominantly unaware

that the dragon motifs used in the activity come from the display objects; the activity, therefore, has not encouraged visitors to look at the objects in detail, or to 'unpack' why the museum offers these crayon rubbing kits. Indeed, to a certain extent, participation in this hands-on activity does not incorporate a 'minds-on' element and actually distracts visitors from browsing the collection (Hein 1998a). As I observed when browsing around the dragon display myself, many visitors would turn to the rubbing activity and leave as soon as they had finished rubbing. In some cases, visitors would be drawn to the activity area without taking a single look of the display. The visitors' preference for participating in edutainment activity implies that a sight-dominated visit creates some sort of 'visual fatigue' from looking at one display case of objects after the other (Classen and Howes 2006: 200). A rubbing activity provides visitors with other sensuous stimulations in enriching their museum experience. To material culturalists concerned with enabling the experiencing of objects, this indicates that the museum mode of the object-human relationship should not be operated merely through informative text. How, then, might the dragon display facilitate the object-human relationship?

As mentioned, one of the features of the dragon display is that contemporary artefacts from different cultures and periods are included in associating the dragon with visitors' daily life experiences. In the section 'dragons in other cultures', photos of tattoos in Eastern and Western styles, Japanese tea sets with dragon decoration, a Welsh flag, Korean lacquer box inlaid with a dragon motif, and Dragonball comics, are assembled to show how different societies depict dragons (figure 2.10). In addition to museum collections, many of these objects have been lent by museum staff, friends of

the museum and community members.



Figure 2.10 The 'dragons in other cultures' display shows many contemporary objects
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)

According to my observations, the display case appeals to a wide range of visitors, probably because the objects connect with their daily life experiences. To some elderly visitors, for example, the Japanese tea set may remind them of similar objects they had due to family connections in the East, whereas teenagers would be amused by seeing one of their favourite childhood comics, *Dragonball*. Some other visitors, taking an aesthetic stance, may be interested in looking at the mother-of-pearl decoration inlaid onto the Korean lacquer box. Interestingly, many visitors spend time in front of the photos of dragon tattoos, curious about the links between such artefacts of popular culture and ancient culture. The innovative combination of objects from various cultures and periods that comprises this exhibition, then, seems an effective visual hook for the engaging of visitors. By relating to visitors' personal connections, such object juxtaposition helps to develop initial object-human relationships. Yet, due to cross-cultural barriers visitors tend to look at

Chinese objects *per se* alongside text. To evaluate whether the personal relationship with objects facilitated by displays such as 'dragons in other cultures' may be elevated to a more reflective level, then, it is essential to explore how textual interpretation might facilitate the object-human dialogue.



Figure 2.11 Trinket box, 21st century, 8cm H
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)

Here is an example of museum interpretation for a trinket box with dragon decoration (Figure 2.11).

'Dennis Noble bought this on holiday in Cumbria this summer. The dragon is a Western type with large wings. However, like an Eastern one, it has a pearl. You find dragons acting as guardians in both East Asian and European stories.'

Keeping within 50 words, the text first tells visitors how this box was acquired. Then it turns to the formal qualities of the object and summarises its European roots, which somehow resembles the East Asian tradition. Introducing its social biography and the cultural significance of its dragon decoration, this text aims to show two different layers of meanings in helping visitors to associate

with the object. The former information helps visitors associate the object with personal experiences, whilst the latter shows visitors how to identify the difference in style between a Western and Eastern dragon. However, as some visitors have pointed out, the interpretation also seems rather thin: it shows that many cultures have different depictions of dragons, but fails to explain what attributes these variations possess. By presenting descriptive facts rather than critical analysis, the text may succeed in establishing knowledge of dragons rather than in deconstructing their fantasy. Informed by the text, object-human relationships operate through personal association and identification. It may inspire visitors to ask why, and yet does not offer any clues to explore the object further.

It should be stressed that apart from fostering accessibility, this popularist interpretation sets out to promote a better understanding of Chinese culture. It is therefore appropriate to consider a text for a traditional Chinese object, to review the extent to which it accomplishes its goal. What follows is the museum text on a celadon plate with applied dragon decoration, in the section of 'Dragons and nature'. (Figure 2.12)

'This dragon twists round to chase a pearl in the water. Dragons were associated with the East and with the colour 'blue-green'. The colour on this dish fits the description perfectly.'



Figure 2.12 Celadon plate with dragon decoration, Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), 46cm D
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)

Longquan celadon is a celadon-glazed ware made in Longquan and neighbouring counties in the province of Zhejiang. It is renowned for producing a celadon green, associated with the lustrous, yet subtle, hue of jade or the magnifying beauty of mountains (Zhu 1994 [1774]: 1.99; Liang 1993 [1723-1815]: 163). Between the 12th and 14th centuries, the skill involved in its construction reached a new height that involved multiple processes of decoration including the application of moulded-relief motifs (Li 1996: 143, 202). This dish can be considered to be one of the refined samples of low-relief decoration combined with incised ornaments. Instead of looking at its aesthetic significance, the museum text adopts a cultural approach suggesting that the dragon has corresponding colours and direction, which can trace its origin from the Daoist's notion of celestial creatures by the second century BCE. According to this Daoist cult, the dragon is considered to be one of the four celestial creatures corresponding to a quadrant in the

ecliptic, encompassing seven mansions of the constellation (Qing *et al.* 1996: 51-54). To summarise, the museum text associates a Yuan dish with an interpretive framework of Daoist symbolism dating back to the Han dynasty (206BCE–220CE). It seems confusing that Longquan ware is characterised by its application of the lustrous celadon glaze, despite all of its decorations such as lotus flowers and fish, and yet the text seems to imply that this dish applies the same coloured glaze, with the intention of corresponding with the 'blue-green' dragon decoration. What the text misses is the interesting aesthetic effect produced by using thinner glaze over the raised motif in order to give the dragon a sense of mystique, as many Chinese people believe. To a certain extent, this over-simplified interpretation misleads visitors into thinking that decorative motifs in Chinese decorative art are based on symbolism, and risks outweighing aesthetic appreciation with cultural readings. By associating the object with wider cultural implications, the text suggests that the object is used for presenting an idea, but not that it is a manifestation of intrinsic aesthetic value. In other words, the object-human relationship here is replaced by an idea-human dialogue, in which the object is marginalised as a container of ideas rather than as a material offering visitors multi-sensuous stimulations. Despite a genuine problem of accessibility, this cultural approach shares with visitors a lot of interesting information about the collection, but is less likely to encourage them to look at an object *per se*. In this sense, the museum text suggests that the object-human relationship be maintained by the visitors' desire to learn. Again, like the sinologist's approach, communicating material culture is a celebration of generalised knowledge, but at the expense of materiality.

By briefly tracing the development of the Schiller collection in the BCM, I have outlined three different modes of the object-human relationship as constituted by museum interpretation. When the Schiller collection first entered the museum, its exhibition consisted of arbitrary juxtaposition, formalistic interpretation and identification information, in constructing a typology of Chinese ceramic art for aesthetic pleasure. This comprised a *connoisseur's mode* of the object-human relationship, developed through visitors' aesthetic sense and prior knowledge. Next, following the development of sinology, the Schiller collection gained its own identity forming a significant part of the oriental art department in 1965. The exhibition of the Chinese collection then came to encapsulate the development of disciplinary studies by enriching the earlier juxtapositions of objects with informative text. This constituted a *pedagogical mode* of the object-human relationship, highlighting knowledge over materiality and imposing the sinologist's approach to studying the object as text. During the 1990s, the museological concern for accessibility then gave rise to a popularist approach of interpretation, communicating objects in a wider cultural context. The BCM launched a dragon display using contemporary and traditional objects from different cultures and diverse edutainment facilities to share the cultural significance of dragon motifs with visitors. Informed by various means of interpretation, including text, this interpretation is a *cultural mode* of the object-human relationship, aiming to present a collection for learning about Chinese cultures yet somehow marginalising the materiality of the objects themselves.

To summarise these modes of the object-human relationship, the connoisseur's interpretation is intended to enshrine the object with visitors

sharing similar sensibilities; the sinologist's approach aims to focus on the significance of disciplinary expertise that requires visitors to learn; whereas the popularist approach tries to communicate cultural information with visitors through diverse facilities. Apart from the connoisseur's mode, the object *per se* is somehow obscured by knowledge or information in these object-human dialogues.

2.3 McElney's collection and the education orientation of Museum of East Asian Art

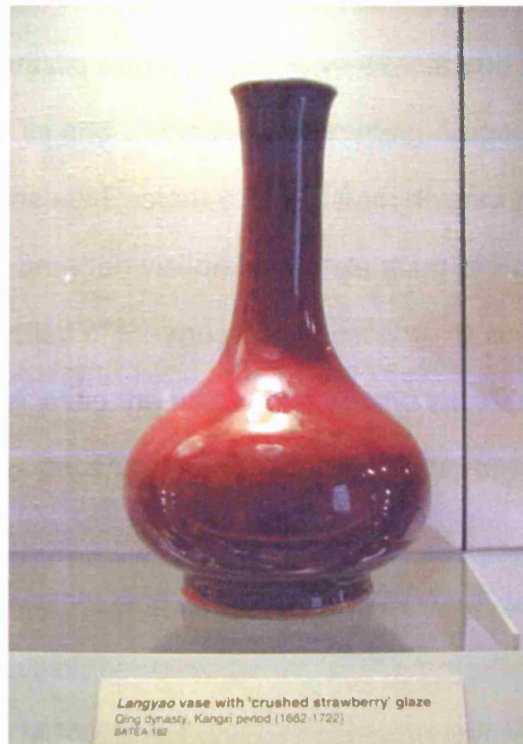
The Museum of East Asian Art (MEAA) is one of the few specialised museums dedicated to promoting art and culture from the region. The majority of the museum's collection was collected by Brian McElney, the founder and honorary keeper of the MEAA. McElney, who worked in Hong Kong as a law attorney for 30 years, started collecting East Asian objects in 1958 (MEAA 2006a). During this time, Chinese collections in the United Kingdom started to be institutionalised and museums and art historians worked with collectors but distinguished themselves as researchers developing professional, disciplinary expertise (Pierson 2007: 202-205). To a certain extent, the process of specialisation cultivated one of the significant criteria for the collecting of Chinese objects: authentic Chinese taste, privileged in understanding the aesthetic tradition of the country in its own terms, rather than perceiving it in a universal context of art (*ibid* 180-182). Although it is uncertain how far McElney was inspired by the collectors' circle based in the UK, his collecting activity can be understood as an exploration of traditional Chinese intellectual taste. Involved in local collectors' circles, and having once held the presidency of the Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong, McElney's collection

encompasses various mediums including ceramics, jades, bronzes, lacquers, ivory and bamboo from China and other South East Asian countries, indicating a great range in his collecting of 'authentic' Chinese artefacts (McElney 2005a). Among the diverse object genres are included blue and whites and monochromes, recognised by experts and connoisseurs internationally; intellectual curios including Yixing teawares, bamboo carving and ink stone, as well as traditional Chinese taste favours; and a few pieces of figures and decorative painted export wares (For collection summary, please refer to appendix A2). It seems that, influenced by connoisseurship and sinology, McElney has been interested not only in constructing the history of an object, but in emulating the traditional intellectual notion of collecting antiques that marked the material life of late imperial China.

Following his retirement to the United Kingdom, in 1993 McElney established the MEAA as a cultural education charity, promoting 'appreciation and study of East and Southeast Asian art and cultures' (MEAA 2006b). As honorary keeper at the museum, McElney focused on studying the latest publications in the field and consequently updating the catalogue data and publishing articles based on his own findings. It is clear that his prime concern was with the identification of the date and authenticity of an object, but he did not neglect the objects' cultural implications. Throughout his studies of Chinese material culture, McElney published articles on such subjects as the changes in Chinese tea drinking customs (2005b), and developed a special interest in looking at the international trade of ceramics and the exchange of ceramic ideas across continents (2006). In some ways, the MEAA can be understood as a collector-researchers' forum that offers resources for the

study of Chinese material culture among his staff, collectors and experts from other institutions. From 22 August to 10 December 2006, the museum launched a temporary exhibition, 'Chinese Ceramics and the Maritime Trade pre-1700' in which Li Jianan, an archaeologist from the Fujian Museum, was invited to carry out research on the production of the ceramic collection and its link to the local kiln system. In promoting the study of Eastern art, McElney is proud to be consulted by collectors and researchers and many curators who have worked at the museum; for instance, Ming Wilson and Stacey Pierson have taken a greater role in the field (Ailsa Laxton 2007, personal communication, 27 November). As the collector and honorary keeper, McElney exerts personal influence over the collection management at the MEAA, which suggests a personal and yet institutional object-human relationship representing his collector-researcher mentality. On the collector's side, the collection embodies his perception of authentic Chinese taste, appreciation of craftsmanship and passion for collecting. On the other hand, the object is considered as a sample piece of art fitting into a typology of its genre, showing the material life of the culture. It is this interesting tension that puts a rather humanised art historian perspective into the museum's approach to interpretation. For instance, conventionally, red monochromes produced by the Qing court would be referred to 'Langyao' wares. The Chinese word 'Langyao' refers to Lang Tingji, the superintendent of the imperial kiln during the 1710s, who improved the chemical recipe of red glaze and mastered the firing technique (Li 1996: 337). In the display of Qing monochromes, the MEAA uses a group label to explain this term and an individual object label to name a piece as 'Langyao vase with strawberry-crushed glaze' that magnifies the aesthetic effect of the brilliant glaze with green crushed strawberry

mottling (Figure 2.13).



**Figure 2.13 Langyao vase with strawberry-crushed glaze, Qing dynasty, c.1820s, 28cm H
(By Ting W Y V, 9 July 2007)**

In addition to its dedication to scholarship, the MEAA is perceived of as a community centre that 'works to encourage education, creativity and communication in relation to such [Eastern] cultures' (MEAA 2006b). In addition to its permanent exhibition focusing on traditional Eastern art objects, the museum works either with its own collections or with other collaborators to launch temporary exhibitions every three to four months, highlighting specific themes more closely related to the contemporary development of Eastern cultures. For instance, in the summer of 2006 the MEAA launched the 'Happiness and Blessing' exhibition, drawing on its own collections to illustrate the cultural significance of symbolic motifs in Chinese art, at the same time organising 'Sera: The Way of the Tibetan Monk', an exhibition of

contemporary photographic images by Sheila Rock. The MEAA's commitment to cultural education involved a wide range of activities and events including academic lectures, artistic workshops, festive events and special interest classes such as Tai Chi and Chinese paper cutting. Engaging visitors and enabling the experience of Eastern cultures from diverse perspectives, these activities and events broaden visitors' understanding of Eastern cultures and subtly foster appreciation of the museum collection. As one visitor said, she could tune into appreciating the brush strokes and ink shades of Chinese landscape painting as decorated onto ceramic wares, once she had attended a series of painting workshops organised by the museum (19 June 2006). In fact, these diverse activities and events suggest an artistic mode of the object-human relationship, which operates by facilitating visitors' experiences of the cultures. Indeed, the MEAA is not only interested in giving visitors a taste of the cultures, but also in some hands-on tips for looking at the collection. Apart from the exhibition promotional events, other activities such as the handling sessions, drawing classes and creative art workshops, encourage visitors to have first-hand experience of working with the collection. To conclude, the MEAA represents a contemporary art museum's effort to contribute to scholarship as well as cultural education, and to broaden the number of visitors for eastern art.

According to feedback from visitors, the MEAA is well received for the quality of the collection, informative text and welcoming atmosphere (MEAA 2005). It seems that visitors take the MEAA seriously and feel comfortable when using the gallery space. How does the museum shape visitors' approaches to Chinese material culture? In the following discussion, I focus

on the museum interpretation of the ceramic gallery in examining the mechanism of the object-human relationship. The ceramic gallery is chosen because the display covers a wide range of themes including art history, cultural facts, symbolism, and figures and stories, some of which are popular among visitors as observed from the initial study.



Figure 2.14 Overview of the ceramic gallery
(By Ting W Y V, 9 July 2007)

Perceiving itself to be a 'temple of objects', the MEAA adopts an artistic approach of display in which visitors appreciate the distinguished craftsmanship. In the ceramic gallery, 23 display cases demonstrate the brief development of Chinese ceramic art whilst three cases offer a glimpse of South East Asian art. Following the conventional idea of arranging the collection according to the medium in an approximate chronological order, the ceramic gallery is set in a modern style (figure 2.14). The MEAA employs well-illuminated glass display cases and transparent plastic stands on a white background to magnify the beauty of the objects. The narration is aided by text, photo panels, educational activities and additional information in relation to production and ceramic art. Appealing to connoisseurship, it is critical that

MEAA does not become elitist but considers accessibility, as contemporary museologists expect.

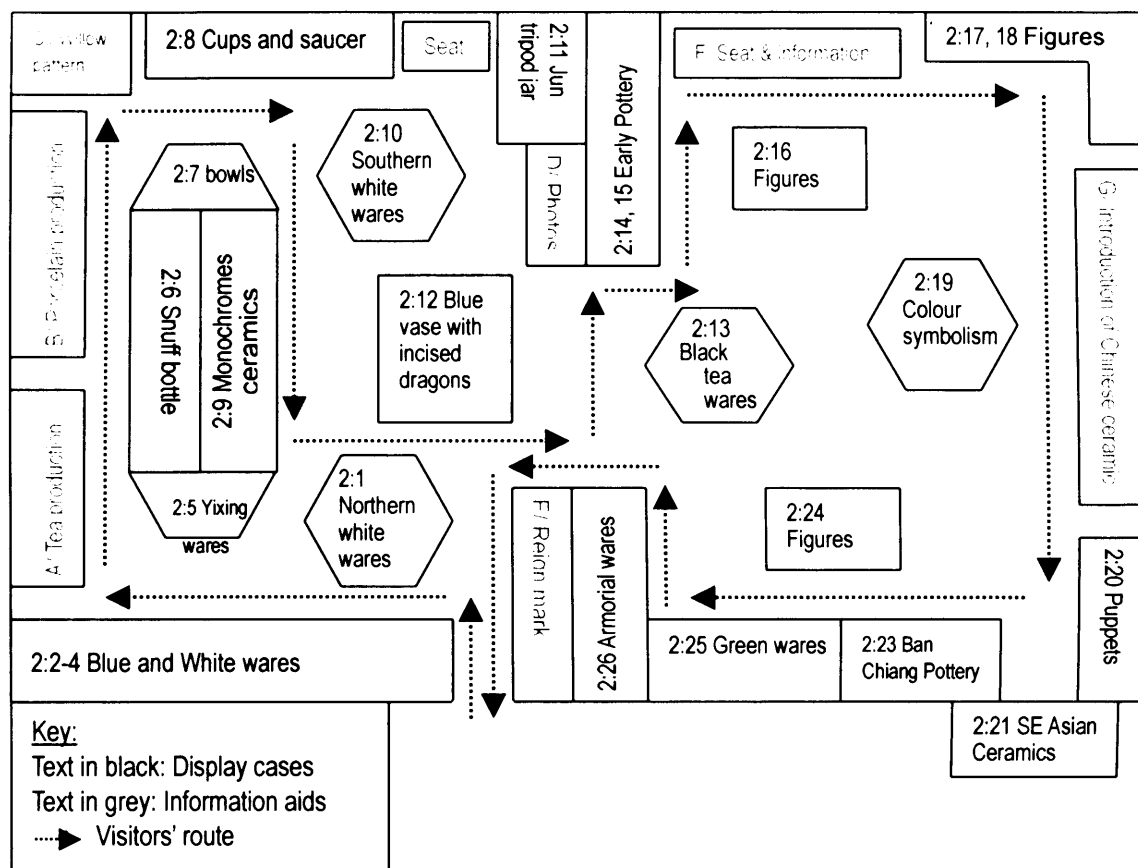


Figure 2.15 Floor plan of the ceramic gallery and visitors' route

After my 14 days of observing the gallery, it was evident that the clear signs that narrate the development of Chinese ceramics mean that the majority of visitors take similar routes, as shown (figure 2.15). Generally, most visitors tend to spend more time in the first half of the exhibition. As visitors look at objects alongside the text, many of them consider the exhibition space to be 'informative' and 'visually pleasing', yet some found the setting 'flat' and the collection 'cold and lifeless'. Nonetheless, the majority of visitors are likely to stop at the display of figures, snuff bottles, and polychrome cups and saucers, because they find a point of entry to associate with these objects. This suggests that even with the aid of museum interpretation, visitors feel the

cross-cultural obstacles that the objects seem to encapsulate. The object-human relationship is thus established upon rather weak connections of personal association and interest.

To communicate Chinese material culture to visitors, the gallery provides informative text panels outlining the history of ceramic art, while individual object labels highlight either aesthetic values or contextualising aspects of cultural significance. Many of these texts apply a specific set of terminology with reference to Western scholarship of eastern art, which is also supported by a glossary, supplementary information sheets and illustrations. On entering the ceramic gallery, one receives a gallery guide leaflet, which includes a brief history of Chinese ceramics, a glossary and hands-on tips suggesting a formalistic approach of the collection. The hands-on tips are in the form of a diagram breaking down an act of viewing into various aspects, encouraging visitors to look at the glaze, form and shape, method of decorations and content of designs, suggesting different points of entry in making sense of ceramics (figure 2.16). By relating form to function, or decoration to identification features, this systematic analysis suggests an artistic mode of the object-human relationship that bridges aesthetic appreciation with cultural understanding. To visitors with a background in art, this is a handy guideline that encourages him/her to engage with a piece of work. However, it is uncertain whether general visitors who are not necessarily interested in art would feel confident enough to evaluate the proportions of each part, or distinguish the different characters of glazes. In some ways, this systematic analysis requires a certain degree of art interest or training; it implies that observing art is detached and rational. It is an

approach that ignores personal feelings and poetic association – the creative dimension of art appreciation. For instance, it does not suggest that visitors imagine running their fingers over the decorations, taking notice of the character of the glaze and how it works together with the incised pattern; nor how a piece of work would nestle in one's hands and how its temperature and texture might raise a poetic metaphor. In short, this implies a sight-dominated analysis which tends to isolate personal feeling and experiences in a dialogue with objects. By proposing a systematic approach, the MEAA confines a rather rigid object-human relationship to the rational and professional.

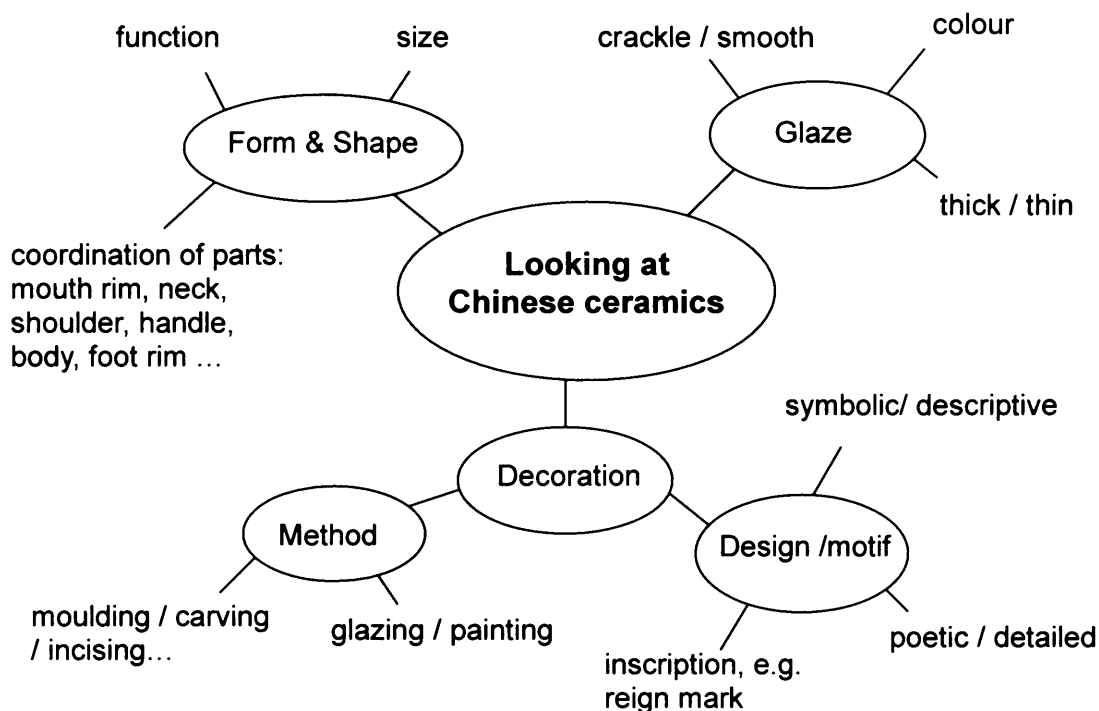


Figure 2.16 Diagram of how to look at Chinese ceramics (quoted from MEAA leaflet)

How does this artistic analysis inform the textual interpretation at the ceramic gallery? As the gallery shows a wide range of ceramic objects covering different themes of the culture, the museum devises aesthetic and

cultural-oriented approaches respectively in regulating visitors' dialogue with objects within its own cultural context. Here are two examples showing these very different approaches. The museum text of a piece of blue and white plate in the style of 'Master of Rock' states:

'Look at how the landscape has been painted vertically to suggest depth rather than giving it a central vanishing point. The house at the top is meant to be further away while the figures at the bottom are meant to be closer to the viewer. Also note how small the figures are, compared to the scale of the landscape.' (figure 2.17)



Figure 2.17 Blue and white plate with landscape decoration,
Qing dynasty, early 17th century, 26cm D
(By Ting W Y V, 9 July 2007)

As many visitors acknowledged their difficulties in understanding the Chinese notion of perspective, this is indeed a delicate attempt to show visitors how

the artist portrays depth, perspective and scale. However, taking differences between Chinese and Western representational conventions into account, for those who are not familiar with Chinese aesthetics, this descriptive explanation does not unpack those aesthetics. What the text misses is that this is the artist's interpretation of nature and conveys a notion of strange originality. To avoid a static geometrical arrangement, the landscape is depicted in curved lines forming a swirling pattern. The rather intensive expression of lines demonstrates the roughness and the extraordinary structure of the rocky mountain; and in contrast to the rugged peaks, the patch of washed blue in the mid-ground suggests a vast, yet deserted highland. Nonetheless, it is an artistic interpretation prompting visitors to focus on the formal qualities of the ceramic decoration in showing an aesthetic notion very different from the Western one. It implies an object-human relationship that is descriptive and rational in presenting information rather than deciphering a way of looking. In this sense this artistic approach is conventional, in that it speaks for the object rather than empowering the object to speak. Hence, the object can be understood as an educational text to show what it is, but not a material means for appreciating how it is formed and what it depicts.

The cultural interpretation approach in the gallery is exemplified by the text for the blue and white seal box with border decoration of a 'Hundred Boys' (figure 2.18), which reads:

'This blue and white seal paste box is decorated with the popular Chinese theme of a 'Hundred Boys'. This design was very popular as it encompassed the Chinese ideal of a large family, particularly of boys.

Extended families were encouraged as children would be expected to look after their parents in their old age. Boys were favoured as they were able to carry on the family name and ancestor worship. Now, one-child families are being encouraged in China, but it still important for a family to have a boy.'



Figure 2.18 Blue and white seal box with 'Hundred Boys' decoration, Ming dynasty, Late 16th century, 24cm D (© MEAA)

The text demonstrates why the motif of 'Hundred Boys' is desirable in traditional Chinese society and how the notion of 'extended families' is perceived in China today. This is an interesting piece of interpretation showing how traditional Chinese people think of the family, a daily life issue that would concern many visitors. Also, it does not only focus on the past, but finds a way to associate a traditional motif with contemporary population policy in mainland China. As many MEAA visitors express an interest in Chinese culture and contemporary issues of the society, this text may encourage one to reflect on one's own notion of family and its cultural implications in the world today. This suggests an object-human relationship operated through common

concerns in bridging the cultural gap across cultures and between the past and the present. Although this would risk replacing the object-human relationship with an idea-human dialogue, it is justified in its deciphering of the rationale of the motif that would encourage a more reflective dialogue between the decoration and visitors.

As a cultural institution dedicated to promoting the cultural education of the East, then, the MEAA is keen to balance scholarship and accessibility concerns in fostering a creative and dynamic object-human relationship. Through its diverse activities and events, the museum tries to encourage visitors' participation in experiencing Eastern cultures so as to develop a better understanding of the collection. Its hands-on workshops and creative art lessons are some of the examples showing the museum's effort in encouraging an object-human relationship that goes beyond sight and information. To a degree, the MEAA is effective in carrying out this interpretive approach to bridge differences. For instance, its cultural interpretation of objects offers an explanation of a cultural phenomenon that helps visitors to associate with and understand the culture through its contemporary concerns. However, the MEAA's artistic approach could be less analytical in deciphering artists' intentions or Chinese aesthetic convention. The cultural-oriented interpretation suggests that the object-human relationship is operated by daily life experiences, but shows its limitation in turning to the object *per se*. By the same token, the defect of the artistic approach is that it implies a detached and rational mode of object-human dialogue that appeals to visitors' interest in art rather than to personal feelings about the formal qualities of object. The MEAA's approach to interpretation thus oscillates between disciplinary studies

and cultural education and, as a result, presents different notions of the object as a sample of Chinese art or as communicative means for understanding other cultures and oneself.

2.4 Static modes of object-human relationship

This chapter has used the case studies of the BCM and the MEAA to briefly introduce various interpretive approaches to Chinese art. Demonstrating different orientations, these case studies represent forms of museological thinking on how to interpret material objects from other cultures, and raise wider issues of communication in relation to elitism, education and accessibility. Locating Schiller's collection in the context of the development of Western connoisseurship and scholarship shows that early attempts at studying Chinese art made an impact on the BCM's interpretation in constructing a history of ceramic art within a universal context of 'beauty'. Following the rise of sinology and later, professional museum concerns with accessibility, the connoisseur approach was interrupted by sinologists' interpretations; popularist cultural displays that demonstrate a shift from connoisseurship to promoting cross-cultural understanding were the result. In the case of the MEAA, the shift is more implicit, with the connoisseur's approach to interpretation implemented by learning aids that integrate art appreciation with cultural education.

With the democratisation of interpretation, the object-human relationship seems to shift into an idea-human relationship, in which appreciation of the object is outweighed by personal association with cultures. This hardly simplifies the complexity of museum interpretation, with its injection of cultural

reflections, aesthetic imaginations and personal experiences into one's dialogue with the collection. However, in this thesis I argue for more complex holistic approaches incorporating emotional and affective responses and that the greatest difficulties in exhibitions of Chinese material culture lie in their static manner, which tends to be descriptive and rational. This interpretive outlook confines the object-human relationship to a pedagogical and sight-dominated perspective, and neglects materiality of the object.

Chapter 3

An eye for beauty: making meaning of Chinese collections

3.1 The mind's eye

Sight begins with light. An object is revealed to us when light is reflected from it, bending into the eyes to form the image on the retina that converts visual stimuli into basic electrochemical signals such as simple lines and shapes. They are then processed by the visual cortex and combined into larger units, such as geometric forms, movements and letters by the cerebral cortex. Receiving these signals, the brain processes them and in doing so can be said to be 'making meaning', activating our memory – stored knowledge – and redirecting the eyes to look for specific clues until an interpretation is confirmed (Gregory 1977: 51-63; Goldstein 2002: 109-115).

The process of seeing is a feedback loop between the brain and eyes, which is hardly objective, rational or reliable. Despite our limited visual acuity and the inconsistencies in interpreting a three-dimensional world from two-dimensional vision, we tend to neglect visual stimuli which are unknown to us and to look only at what we already know (Solso 1997: 146-147). For instance, a white porcelain vase made during the 10th to 12th centuries is usually neglected by museum visitors or perceived to be something visually dull and technically modest. However, its simple yet well-proportioned form and restrained design is a 'perfect and indivisible unity' demonstrating 'skilful potting without loss of virility', according to pre-eminent studio potter Bernard Leach (1940: 38-39). On the other hand,

the philosopher of art Arthur Danto (2005:36) associates the vase with the white mists and waterfalls of ancient China and reflects upon the Neoconfucian teaching that a work of art is an end in its own right. It seems that we choose what our eyes see. Similar objects reveal different meanings to their viewers according to those viewers' prior knowledge and personal background. Looking is a reciprocal process that objectifies the subject's visual perceiving and subjectifies the object's qualities. Considering this in the context of an exhibition, how can a museum engage visitors to look at a Chinese collection, something that is unfamiliar to their aesthetic tastes and daily life experiences?

In this chapter, I explore the mechanism of museum-viewing in the hope of re-shaping the visitor's meaning-making process. Based on visitors' studies conducted at BCM and MEAA, I shall investigate how the reciprocal process of viewing operates in relation to Chinese material culture. First, I shall outline various visitors' approaches to viewing by making observations on how they interact with the Chinese collections in the research sites. Second, I investigate visitors' interpretive strategies in order to enquire which object would speak to visitors within the context of exhibition communication. In conclusion, I summarise how visitors receive the collection and the difficulties they encounter in communicating with Chinese material culture.

3.2 How do visitors look at the collection?

I devised an analytical frame in order to examine visitors' responses towards objects and museum interpretation aids, such as labels,

illustrations and education activities. As meaning making is a reciprocal process merging the viewer's personal thoughts with the object's physical qualities, the framework is used to outline the visitor's mode of looking at the BCM and MEAA collections in considering what Chinese material culture has to offer to people.

In recent decades, empirical research has been undertaken into the needs, motivations and expectations of diverse museum audiences (McManus 1994; Piscitelli and Anderson 2001), into how visitors interact with specific galleries or exhibitions (Bailey *et al* 1998; Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri 2001a and 2001b), and so as to enable the theorising of visitors' experiences in order to develop a new museum culture (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Falk and Dierking 1992). Many researchers have enquired into how visitors derive meaning from exhibitions and have developed various frameworks to summarise visitors' responses, stressing that museums are obliged to serve a wide range of visitors with different demands and intellectual interests. For instance, enquiring into how the varied motivations of visitors shape their visits, Zahava (1999: 15) categorises museum experiences into the modes of social activity, object appreciation, learning process and introspective association. McIntyre (2006: 24) identifies the visitor as a researcher, searcher/follower and browser, demonstrating different preferences for museum interpretive approaches. Such studies offer detailed analyses of visitors' behaviour patterns in exhibitions; however, I argue that another framework for examining modes of visitors' experiences is needed in exploring the different emphases of my research questions. While studies mainly

conducted by educationalists and marketing researchers focus on what visitors bring to an exhibition, and how museums might engage with a wider audience, I consider visitors' viewing experiences within the context of the object-human relationship. Instead of drawing on wider issues of meaning making in the museum, I take a material culturalist's stance and look into the mechanism of visitors' meaning-making processes in relation to objects and institutional interpretations.

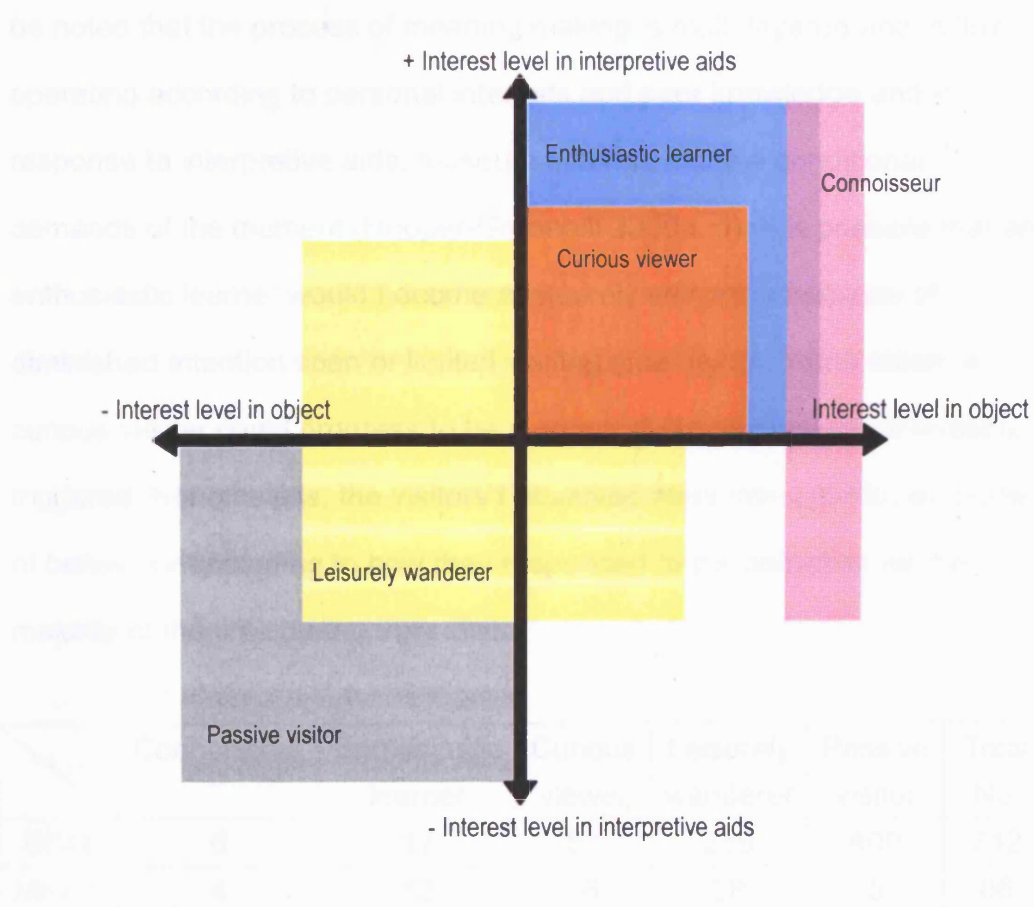


Figure 3.1 Five styles of museum visit

In observing visitors' approaches to the collections, I have categorised their approaches to the collection into five styles: connoisseurs;

enthusiastic learners; curious viewers; leisurely wanderers; and passive visitors. These categories are based upon visitors' interest level in looking at objects and at museum interpretation such as labels, illustrations and activities (figure 3.1). Museum interpretation is included as it is a fundamental component of the visitors' dialogue with the objects. To make sense of the exhibition, visitors are likely to relate text to the collections – especially when looking at an object from a foreign culture. It should also be noted that the process of meaning making is multi-layered and in flux, operating according to personal interests and prior knowledge and in response to interpretive aids, museum settings and the conditional demands of the moment (Hooper-Greenhill 2000a: 5). It is possible that an enthusiastic learner would become a leisurely wanderer because of diminished attention span or limited visiting time. By the same token, a curious viewer could progress to be a connoisseur once his/her interest is triggered. Nonetheless, the visitors I observed fitted into a particular mode of behaviour according to how they responded to the collection for the majority of the time during their visits.

	Connoisseur	Enthusiastic learner	Curious viewer	Leisurely wanderer	Passive visitor	Total No.
BCM	6	17	51	259	409	742
MEAA	4	13	16	28	5	66

Table 3.2 Number of visitors categorised into different styles of museum visit

Table 3.2 shows the numbers of visitors falling into the five styles of visits at each research site. In the Schiller gallery at the BCM, it is obvious that visitors do not expect to see an exhibition of Chinese art and have little

motivation to look at the collection. This explains why a large proportion of visitors belong to the spectrum of low interest in objects and interpretive aids. In addition to personal preferences, the dim lighting, confusing space setting and insufficient interpretation further discourage visitors' viewing. In contrast, visitors coming to the MEAA tend to have a clear visit agenda, including personal interest in and/or connection to Eastern art or culture. This accounts for the relatively high numbers of connoisseurs and enthusiastic learners. In what way would these visitors see the Chinese collections differently? The following discussion outlines the characteristics of each mode of visitors' responses.

➤ Connoisseurs – looking for objects *per se*

As shown in figure 3.1, the category of connoisseur refers to visitors who are eager to study objects and would probably be interested in text related to identification. Six out of 742 in BCM and four out of 66 visitors in MEAA show traits of this approach to viewing objects. In fact, four visitors are collectors of Chinese ceramics, two are artists, and the others show a keen interest in pottery, especially contemporary trends such as studio pottery. Having a clear agenda of what to look at, these visitors can be regarded as object-admirers, who scrutinise details – including glaze bubbles, the shape of a foot rim or an imperial reign mark – and place these perceptual attributions in their own intellectual context. Seeing objects as art from a universal point of view, they tend to look for technical consummation, and in the cases of collectors and experts, historical significance and rarity. Their universal outlook is also reflected in their preferences for interpretation. Most of them tend to look for production

information and technical development of the art, but are less interested in cultural references. Nonetheless, the connoisseur mode of viewing is not merely an intellectual game for identification, but visual pleasure as well as emotional fulfilment. For example, an art-lover who is attracted to a plain celadon bowl finds looking at it 'uplifting' (BCM: C031). It is interesting that these viewers are less concerned with exhibition design, space setting or display rationale. Looking at the object *per se*, those visitors coming to the Schiller gallery even prefer the space to be quiet and dull so they can become absorbed in the beauty of the objects.

➤ Enthusiastic learner: looking for knowledge

A visitor demonstrating a high level of interest in collections and text is defined as an 'enthusiastic learner'. Most of these visitors appear to be art lovers or to have some personal experience of the culture, which enables them to engage vigorously with the collection and text. To these visitors, looking at the collection is a learning process in which they tend to seek museum interpretation in order to transform objects into historical evidence or signifiers of the culture. Although personal interest varies, in most cases they are content to learn from what the museum has to offer by way of developing their intellectual capacity. For instance, a visitor states that he is not particularly interested in blue and white ware and yet looking at those objects has triggered his curiosity regarding to what extent Delftware was influenced by Chinese pottery (MEAA 17 August 2006). However, these visitors also tend to be quite critical of the museum text and the exhibition setting, and demand more aids to understanding the collection or the culture. For instance, some visitors claim that the BCM often misses basic

object information such as a common name and its dating. Many of them argue that a lot of ceramic pieces look so modern that they appear to have been produced recently and therefore museum interpretation should distinguish a consumer product from a historical piece of art by identifying the collection in its own cultural context. They hold high expectations of museums, probably because they consider the institution as a temple of knowledge.

➤ Curious viewer: looking for novelty

Visitors categorised as 'curious viewers' can be interested in the collection or text, if their interests are triggered. They may not show particular interest in the culture or the art, but would like to explore something new or different and tend to make sense of their visual experience through discussions or museum interpretation. For instance, a visitor who is interested in the black tea ware from the 12th century finds no labels relating to the objects. She then reads the labels in the same display case and concludes that the object was produced in 8th century (BCM: C141). To the majority of visitors, a sensory spark for further interaction is not a plain tea bowl, but something unusual, such as ivory figures, snuff bottles and other objects with 'quirky' designs or in 'weird' form. Curious viewers regard a museum as a 'cabinet of curios' that displays objects they have not seen before. Looking at Chinese collections is for them like joining a visual buffet in which they tend to look for novelty, such as distinctive usage, symbols and stories. It is likely that they enjoy the collection as a representation of a foreign culture.

➤ Leisurely wanderer: browsing for personal association

About one third of the visitors are considered to be 'leisurely wanderers' who browse around the gallery without much focus. As their attention span is likely to diminish drastically after viewing cases of objects, they browse the objects of particular interest and walk around the rest of the exhibition. Objects with which they are familiar or that they find momentarily visually interesting, attract their attention. Contemporary objects, such as tattoos, a Tammy Girl T-shirt with dragon design, and a tiny jade animal and fish figure with a human head, are some of the popular objects triggering the interest of visitors in this way. As visitors have different learning styles, it is possible that some leisurely wanderers prefer activity or exploring with props, rather than merely reading labels. According to the BCM, many leisurely wanderers stop at the children's activity area and look at the rubbing relief of the dragon, but may not become involved in the rubbing activity. This suggests that different types of interpretive aids, such as visual clues and education activities, would help visitors to engage in a more substantial and meaningful dialogue with the collection.

➤ Passive visitor: absent minded browsing

Four hundred and nine out of 742 visitors in BCM and five out of 66 visitors in MEAA showed limited motivation in looking at the collection. At BCM, they would either use the gallery as a corridor to other exhibitions, or a resting ground for taking a seat or engaging in conversation; whilst in MEAA, they are likely to be members of a social group that seemed

disinterested in making sense of their visit. In a way, the collection is hidden from these visitors because they look at the exhibition only as a backdrop. It is possible that some of the considerable number of passive visitors at BCM would progress to curious viewers if the museum were to accommodate their needs by employing a greater variety of interpretive aids, such as audio clips or illustrative leaflets.

Categorising visitors' responses to the Chinese collections into these five modes of interaction reveals that visitors' motivations and personal experiences of the collection or the culture have greatly enhanced their capacity to associate with the objects. In other words, an object speaks to visitors once it enters their personal context in terms of aesthetic taste, emotional association or intellectual interest. Visitors perceive it as art, cross-cultural reference or visual curiosity and thus, multiple meanings are constructed through reciprocal dialogues with an object. However, the process of meaning making is a complicated mechanism that involves a network of communication between visitors and collection, anonymous members of public and museum culture, and the past and present within a wider socio-cultural context. This analysis does not aim to detail this holistic mechanism, but tries to reveal some aspects of it – namely, the object-human relationship – in relation to visitors' motivation. It seems that most visitors may be interested in looking at something 'unique' or 'beautiful', but are not necessarily interested in understanding the culture or the art. To many, the Chinese collections may be 'quite nice' but, to a great extent, difficult to associate with their own personal experiences.

3.3 What does an object say?

To explore further the object-human relationship in a museum context, I have investigated what objects 'say' to visitors and how people elaborate on the choices of their favourite objects within their interpretive repertoires.

The enquiry is based on two main sources: 198 visitors' commentaries from the People's Choice event collected in the MEAA and 158 semi-structured interviews at the Schiller gallery, both of which invited visitors to choose a favourite object and talk about its personal meanings for them. I realise that the enquiry itself would have made an impact on visitors' interpretations in that it required visitors to use their interpretive repertoires more extensively than usual. However, I argue that this did not change visitors' interpretations; rather, it encouraged them to organise their thoughts and opinions of the objects. As a result, it generated useful data for identifying visitors' interpretive strategies making meaning out of a foreign collection.

Clearly, the BCM's and MEAA's gallery settings and institutional cultures influence visitors' interpretive strategies. For instance, visitors in MEAA are more likely to associate the collection with stories simply because the museum offers more information in this area. Nonetheless visitors to both sites, whether or not they have personal interests in and prior knowledge of the collections, show significantly similar interpretive strategies. For example BCM visitors, like many coming to the MEAA, are likely to find figures and textiles far more interesting than plain ceramic

utensils, despite the fact that BCM, as an integrated museum, has an audience with limited motivation and interest in the collection in comparison to the MEAA visitors' enthusiasm for learning about the culture. It is obvious that though personal interests and expectations towards museum experience vary, most visitors tend to lack an analytical framework and the appropriate art vocabulary to express their viewing experiences verbally. Hence, I argue that visitors from these museums share identical interpretive repertoires; I have therefore analysed their responses to their favourite objects as if they are a single interpretive community.

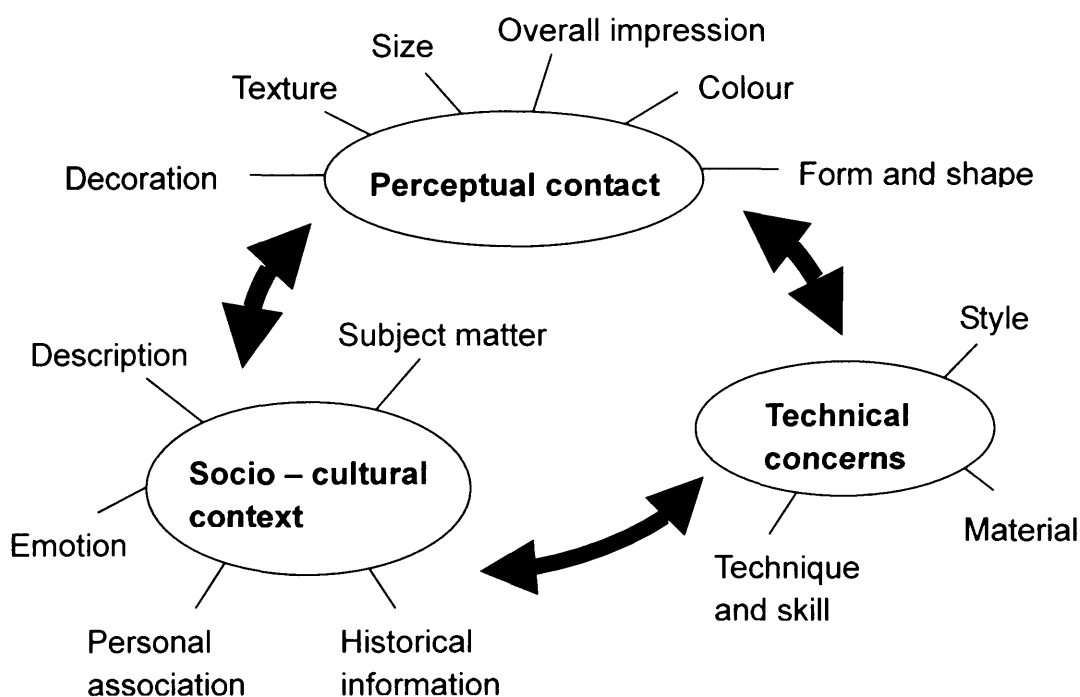


Figure 3.3 Visitors' interpretive strategies

Visitors responded to the request to elaborate on their favourite object in one of the three ways: making a statement about their interpretation of the object; associating it with their own personal experiences; or asking for additional information. Three themes – perceptual response, socio-cultural

association and technical concern – thus emerge. Each theme is further sub-categorised into topics revolving around visitors' feelings, thoughts and opinions of their favourite object(s). These topics show the visitors' effort in putting their viewing experiences into words and making meaning out of the perceptual qualities of an object according to their prior knowledge and personal experiences (figure 3.3). It should be clarified that, although figure 3.3 may appear to be well-structured, it does not aim to suggest a definitive classification of meaning making process. Rather, it is a tentative device for analysing visitors' responses that are, by nature, nebulous.

I am aware that looking at a piece of work is an integral experience, which encompasses 'deep involvement in and effortless progression of the activity' (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 7). As a visitor stated, 'it is very difficult to look at the object and tell you the reasons because there is a mix of things, and you would look at things altogether' (BCM: G047). Visitors do not view the subject, perceptual qualities or technical aspects of objects as separate entities. In fact, the more visitors explore different attributes of an object the more layers of meaning he/she is able to unpack. I argue that different topics of interpretive strategies show different dimensions of the dialogues between visitors and the Chinese collections.

3.3.1 Perceptual response

This theme refers to the visitors' interpretation of their visual experiences in relation to the physical qualities of an object displayed in the Schiller Gallery. It includes many art elements and general visual effects, such as colour, decoration, form and shape, overall impression, size and

texture. These topics are discussed according to frequency of occurrence.

➤ Overall impression (81 out of 342 visitors)

The topic of 'overall impression' concerns visitors' initial responses to their favourite objects as a whole. The majority of visitors tended to use generalised words, such as 'beautiful', 'nice' and 'stunning', to describe their visual pleasure. It is likely that many visitors found it difficult to put their appreciation into words while many tried to relate their comments to perceptual attributes of an object, but failed to specify the particular qualities of the attributes mentioned. For instance, a visitor who liked a jade figure of a hare said, 'it is small, looks nice and is a nice colour' (MEAA: J091).

It may be impossible to define a visitor's personal notion of beauty, yet somehow it seems to relate to their cultural perception. 26 out of 81 visitors considered their favourite objects to be 'unique' or 'different', referring to them in such terms as 'not seen this before' or 'not something you would see in daily life'. It is interesting that within this group, 10 visitors compared the object with their perception of Chinese culture. Some considered the object unusual because it did not conform to their expectations of Chinese art while others claimed the objects represent 'essences of Chineseness'. This shows that visitors are unfamiliar with both the collection and the cultures, and therefore they seek to distinguish qualities that are in contrast to their daily experiences or aesthetic taste. In other words, the visitors' interests are triggered by unfamiliarity, regardless of whether or not an object is Chinese.

➤ Form and shape (80 out of 342 visitors)

Eighty visitors appreciated the three-dimensional qualities of their favourite objects and how the artist had arranged these elements. Few visitors felt confident in analysing form and shape with artistic criteria, such as proportion and symmetry. Most of them examined the visual effect that the form and shape creates, and its relationship with other perceptual elements such as colour, decoration and texture. 'Simple', 'unique' 'expressive', or generalised words like 'lovely' and 'perfect' were the most frequent descriptors. For instance, visitors referred to 'decorative' or 'daily life' objects as 'simple' and modern', and imputed 'figures' with 'liveliness'. It is likely that visitors associate these qualities of forms and shapes with their daily experiences.

➤ Colour (73 out of 342 visitors)

Colour is a formal element of art which the visitors easily associated with their daily life experiences. 73 visitors claimed that colour was one of the significant attributes of their favourite objects. Many visitors considered the colours to be appealing for personal reasons, such as taste, or 'it looks beautiful in my house' (BCM: M118), and yet few had the capacity to elaborate upon what visual properties of the colours they found appealing.

In terms of qualities, rich colours or colourful variations were better received than plain or soft tones. 50 out of 73 visitors were fond of objects decorated in colourful tones or vibrant colour(s), while 23 of them liked the soft and subtle hues of the objects. It was likely that visitors relating to plain

monochromes were interested in art or had received some form of art training.

➤ Decoration (69 out of 342 visitors)

In general, visitors are likely to devise diverse strategies in looking at decoration: either identifying the content, describing its style, associating it with personal meaning and/or seeking contextual information. It is likely that a visitor's imagination will be fired by stories, emotional expressions and familiar subjects out of the representational subject matter (subject matter will be discussed below). For instance, a visitor liked the bats portrayed on a polychrome plate because 'they look as if they'll fly off [from] the plate' (MEAA: C045) and another who liked a wooden screen with landscape, animals and figures, said they may 'make up a story about these' (BCM: W155). It seems that familiarity with the subject matter gives visitors a greater capacity to associate with the object. Furthermore, when looking at styles of decoration, visitors tend to be more interested in delicate decorations rather than simple design. 29 visitors explicitly described their favourite objects as being 'complicated' or 'delicate'. Detailed decoration was seen as an instant indicator of technical consummation.

➤ Others

Size and texture were two minor physical attributes visitors associated with their favourite objects. In the category of size, 13 out of 25 visitors were fascinated by tiny objects because they related to technical ingenuity or delicate cultural practices of China. On the other hand, 12 visitors were

fond of large items for their powerful visual effect, which, they claimed, immediately attracts one's attention, and contrast with Chinese things they had seen before. Although visitors were less likely to imagine how an object would smell, feel or sound, 16 out of 342 visitors falling into this category suggested some interesting interpretive strategies. Six visitors used their aesthetic imagination to explore how the qualities of texture work with other physical attributions of an object; four visitors expressed how these would feel when using the objects; and three of them gave personal meanings in interpreting the texture. From the vocabularies they employed, it is possible that visitors, who saw this as a significant category of their favourite objects, were equipped with prior knowledge or even some form of art training.

The majority of visitors, then, have a limited interpretive repertoire when expressing their aesthetic experiences in words. They tend to use general words, such as simple, delicate or modern, to describe the qualities of art elements and are less ready to use formalistic tactics; for example, composition, proportion or rhythm in evaluating the artistic attribution of an object. Though some visitors show an interest in looking at objects with minimal design or decoration, most of them are more likely to appreciate large objects decorated with bright colours and intricate and representational details. To many visitors, these qualities are associated with technical ingenuity, or at least offer more visual enjoyment.

3.3.2 Socio-cultural association

This theme explores visitors' interpretive strategies in looking at an

object in a wider context, either making cross-cultural references or in relation to personal experiences. It has been categorised into these topics: content and subject matter; personal association; historical information; description and emotion; and demonstrating visitors' abilities in interpreting perceptual qualities of objects for another dimension of meaning.

➤ Subject matter (125 out of 283 visitors)¹

When visitors show limited interpretive repertoires, they tend to look at the subject matter of an object or content of its decoration in making sense of their favourite objects. In talking to visitors in BCM and MEAA, I found that one of the most important qualities of the visitors' favourite objects is originality, which demonstrates different ideas of representation, skills, and aesthetic notions. Even though some objects show familiar subject matter, their artistic expression is different. Hence, the recognisable content of a piece of work highlights the differences and consequently arouses an interest in exploring the intrinsic values of the object. To investigate visitors' preferences with regard to subject matter, table 3.4 summarises the number of visitors who select objects relating to five themes: figure; mythical creature; animal; decorative elements; and landscape and plants.

Subject	Figure	Mythical creature	Animal	Decorative elements	Landscape & plants	Total
No. of visitors	68	64	61	48	42	283

Table 3.4: Visitors' preference on subject matter

¹ It is clear that decorative art work does not necessarily involve a figurative or other representational subject matter. For example, some Chinese ceramic designs are renowned for substituting pure form and delicate skill for content. Indeed, 59 out of 384 visitors chose objects without a narrative or representational subject and therefore could not be taken into account here.

Being the most popular form among visitors, ivory or bronze figures received more attention than portrayals on objects. Many visitors, focusing on an expressive look or theatrical posture of the figures, complimented their 'liveliness' and projected personae into these objects. For instance, one visitor liked an ivory sculpture of Dong Fangshou because 'it's a tiny object but Dong Fangshou still manages to be giving the peach a covetous look. I love the story that he stole the peaches of immortality [and] lived to 18,000' (MEAA: I033). This example also shows that visitors are interested in learning about stories relating to the figures and are likely to read the museum text in this regard. It is interesting that visitors are likely to look at the decoration as an 'authentic' representation of historical fact. For instance, a visitor discussing a blue and white vase with decoration depicting fishermen, considered that the decoration demonstrates 'how people get to work, how they fish and how they attain food' and that 'men work[ed] outside and women stay[ed] at home at that time' (BCM: C060).

Mythical creatures are the next most popular subject to which visitors relate. Some of them are iconic Eastern images, such as the dragon, phoenix and qilin. A considerable number of visitors made personal connections to depictions of these figures with an expressive look, whimsical form and dramatic body language, such as the tomb guardian, Chimera and Garuda. Alternatively, a few visitors looked to calmer figures for emotional comfort.

Next, non-mythical animals are fairly popular among visitors. Visitors' personal interests and/or anthropomorphising tendencies were common in

discussions of these objects, while the 'accuracy' of representation was drawn upon in considering how well the object is made. According to interviews at both sites, the animal theme is also related to an interest in Chinese symbolism, the zodiac and folk stories.

Visitors are less interested in making meaning out of such decorative elements as geometrical pattern, inscription and abstract motif. Many of my informants deconstructed decorative elements into shape, colour and lines and considered how the composition and rhythm of these elements work with their form and material. As mentioned, visitors who had received some form of art training were more confident in looking at such perceptual qualities of an object and freely exercising their own artistic imagination.

The subject of landscape, including the portrayal of plants and the natural environment, has a significant role in Chinese art. However, it does not receive its fair share of attention in the museums. In most cases, visitors associated this subject matter with qualities such as delicacy, expression or inspiration. Some enjoyed the subject matter because 'there are a lot of things to see' (MEAA: W155). Yet most visitors found it difficult to understand the very different artistic expression of landscape in Chinese art. Many visitors describe these motifs as 'flat', 'crude' or 'naïve', and compared them to 'a kid's work that can't quite get the perspective right' (BCM 16 November 2007). It is clear that they require some information as regards looking at this subject in its cultural context.

To summarise, in their processes of meaning making visitors are likely

to associate not only with subject matter with which they can identify, but also those that seem to offer dramatic elements and cultural richness. Given the cross-cultural context, figures, mythical creatures and animals are therefore three of the most popular themes, serving as a point of entry to the Chinese collection.

➤ Personal association (106 out of 342 visitors)

This topic discusses how visitors make personal connections with their favourite objects and what element of an object triggers this meaning-making process. 106 out of 342 visitors recalled images, ideas, thoughts and memories to relate an object to their personal context.

31 out of 106 visitors looked at elements in which they were most interested. For instance, a visitor who is interested in Buddhism found a bronze Buddha head appealing (BCM: M049), and a jade miniature of a greyhound appealed to a dog lover (MEAA: J024). As personal interests vary, there is no obvious pattern in which elements generate the visitors' personal connections. Perceiving an object within one's personal context, 18 visitors cited personal meanings of an object according to their recollection of prior experiences. For instance, a camel figure reminded one visitor of her travelling experiences in a desert outside of Dunhuang (MEAA: X130); a black tea ware appealed to another visitor because it resembled the slipware pots he made (BCM: C100); and a court robe conveyed a sense of soberness relating to a church ceremony that a third visitor enjoys (BCM: T021). It seems that because of a lack of context, visitors tend to relate Chinese collections to their daily life experiences.

Rather than reminiscences, 29 visitors used their imagination to create an interesting dialogue with the favourite objects. A visitor looking at a Jun bowl repaired by a golden patch was fascinated by the fact that people would make every effort to conserve a humble object like this, which showed 'everything stands in its own right' (BCM: C091). On the other hand, some visitors looked at their favourite objects imaginatively. Interested in a dream stone picture, a visitor imagined creating different landscape scenes according to seasonal changes (MEAA: X027). Inspired by the objects, some of them created personal messages, mostly likely aesthetic or spiritual, that spoke to them.

In addition, 16 visitors looked at their favourite object for cross-cultural references according to their cultural perceptions. One visitor perceived Chinese art to be delicate and tiny, although her favourite object, a bronze beaker, would suggest otherwise (BCM: M109); while another considered that a bronze paperweight of a boy reading a book demonstrated how education played a significant role in ancient China (MEAA: B167). To some extent, visitors' cultural associations or perceptions are vague in the sense that they are prepared to accept the museum's explanation, even though this may contradict their established view.

Motivated by personal interest and daily life experiences, then, visitors tended to relate the objects to a personal context, to aestheticise their viewing, or to redefine the culture. These diverse strategies could be perceived as the visitors' efforts to associate with the collection in order to

overcome the cultural differences between the objects and themselves.

➤ Historical information (66 out of 342 visitors)

This topic examines what information would help visitors put the collection into a historical and cultural context. 66 out of 342 visitors expressed an interest in exploring information including dating, function and usage, and the story and symbolism of their favourite objects.

First and foremost, the majority of visitors are interested in learning about the age of an object. Some visitors are fascinated by the fact that an object can survive throughout the ages. They are likely to ask why or how an object is preserved and even enquire why the museum houses such an object as part of the collection. In addition, many of my informants reflected upon the use of certain early techniques in China and compared the development of Chinese decorative art with that of other cultures.

Visitors tend to seek information to place an object in its socio-cultural context. Some of the most frequently asked questions in my data concerned what the object was used for and by whom, why craftsmen would have made an artefact in a particular style and how different cultures have influenced some Chinese designs. It was obvious that visitors would appreciate having aids or assistance in suggesting how to look at an object in its own context.

➤ Description (55 out of 342 visitors)

This topic concerns the visitors' interpretive strategies in identifying

various elements or figures shown on or by the object and/or in making further interpretations. Looking at a subject matter or decoration that is recognisable, helps visitors to make further interpretations in relation to their personal interests, feelings and intentions. 27 visitors used this strategy to associate with their favourite objects. For example, one visitor described the figures *Si Satchanalai Wrestlers* as 'full of life' and said that 'one can imagine the next move' (MEAA: C018). In most cases, visitors are likely to associate their favourite objects with stories or personalities – either created by them or informed by the museum labels. For instance, a visitor interested in a seated lion thought the figure 'majestic, very serious and a little bit mysterious' and who 'would do his job on guard very well, but if you throw a ball at him, he will play along with you' (BCM: X107).

➤ Emotion (37 out of 342 visitors)

This topic examines visitors' 'subjective feeling' towards their favourite objects. In general, visitors who expressed their feelings about an object tended to describe it in great detail. 'Inspiring', 'relaxing' and 'happy', were the three most frequent adjectives used by the visitors when outlining their aesthetic appreciation. 15 out of 37 visitors were inspired by the objects in terms of intellectual pursuit or aesthetic imagination. For example, a visitor who was inspired intellectually thought an ivory seal encouraged her 'to touch it, study it, discover its story and history' (MEAA: I011), while another saw different things, such as a dancing woman from a painting of a lotus flower (BCM: X112). In addition, 13 visitors found peace in looking at their favourite objects. The visual stimuli that sooth visitors are uncertain: some visitors do not explain the reason; others refer to simplicity, soft and plain

colours and most consider subject matter, which in most cases relates to religious figures or landscape motifs. Ten visitors felt contented while looking at smiling figures, children or animals. For instance, a visitor claimed that a jade figure of a boy holding a cat 'looks very agile' and 'makes me smile' (MEAA: J095).

The topics relating to socio-cultural association show, then, that visitors devise various strategies for relating to an object, but are less resourceful in looking at it in its cultural context. These strategies include identifying representational or abstract elements; projecting human temperament; building creative links according to one's own personal interest, experiences and imagination; and expressing emotional needs. It is difficult to recognise particular patterns of how visitors associate with an object. Visitors are likely to appeal to function and usage, stories and symbolism, and representational elements, with which they are familiar and yet which still feel unfamiliar in some respects. Thus objects in the form of or decorated with representational elements, such as figures and animals, are particularly likely to appeal visually.

3.3.3 Technical concerns

In addition to looking at an object in an aesthetic or cultural context, visitors associate it with, and are interested in, the technical ingenuity of how the object was made in the past. This theme covers the style, technique and skill, and materials of objects.

➤ Style (112 out of 342 visitors)

This topic refers to how visitors look at the aesthetic qualities of an object in relation to its craftsmanship. Unlike the topic of 'overall impression' discussed earlier, this topic concerns how visitors look at various artistic elements holistically and make an aesthetic statement about the objects. In other words, while the 'overall impression' focuses on visitors' general responses, 'style' is about the kinds of aesthetic ideas visitors associate with an object.

112 out of 342 visitors made aesthetic statements about their favourite objects, among which the most frequent entries were intricacy, simplicity, timelessness, and 'lifelikeness'. 49 out of 112 visitors were fascinated by the aesthetic quality of intricacy, which probably relates to size, detailed decoration and the skill employed. For example, one visitor liked a tiny ivory seal with a 1200-word inscription because 'the inscription is incredible and it is almost impossible to comprehend that it could actually have been produced' (MEAA: I022). However, there are some visitors who consider objects of thin texture, plain design and with subtle or even minimal decoration, to be delicate. In BCM, a visitor looking at a white bowl with incised lotus flowers defined it as 'delicate' because of its thin and translucent body, simple form and subtle pattern (C080). It seems that the style of intricacy offers visitors rich details and/or visual proof of genius skill to augment their aesthetic feast.

In addition, 37 visitors associated their favourite objects with the style of simplicity. In most cases, this style related to the object's light colour,

simple form or shape and minimal decoration, none of which distracts the viewer from purity of form and colour. Visitors have different ideas on simplicity and some visitors define simplicity as including the qualities of subtlety and delicacy; others associate simplicity with emotionally comfort in the form of tranquility or relaxation. According to interviews at the museums, visitors who make such aesthetic statements often have a certain level of art training.

Another aesthetic quality visitors were likely to take into account, was the object's timelessness. 21 visitors defined their favourite objects as 'modern' or 'classical'; they thought that the object could have been made yesterday or that it demonstrated an ingenious craftsmanship that contemporary artists try to emulate. Visitors' ideas varied as to what constitutes timelessness: some described an archaic design as 'contemporary', while others described a simple form as 'classical'. It appears that they associated timelessness with objects that are simple yet unfamiliar, objects that can be contextualised into the contemporary art scene.

Moreover, 18 visitors identified the quality of being 'lifelike' as a feature of their favourite object. As the objects involved in this category are in the form of/ decorated with figures or animals, it is likely that this quality relates to the expressiveness of the subject matter.

These aesthetic qualities devised by visitors suggest that their interpretive strategies comprise looking for visual satisfaction, making

personal meaning, or identifying details for further association. Various factors, such as the visitors' interest in art and prior knowledge of the collection and its culture, and museum interpretations, influence how visitors interpret the style of the collection.

➤ **Technique and skill (55 out of 342 visitors)**

55 out of 342 visitors were interested in the skill or techniques involved in the making of their favourite objects. Most of them tended to appreciate the 'excellent craftsmanship' embodied by the collection, but were less likely to explore the technical processes. 22 out of 55 visitors referred to the visual enjoyment gained from observing technical ingenuity, while 16 visitors named specific techniques, which, in most cases, related to carving. It is possible that this particular technique was mentioned because it is the most obvious one among many others that include ceramic firing, enamelling or bronze casting. Expressing their appreciation of techniques and skills, 15 visitors considered the difficulties that the craftsmen would have encountered and the time involved in the object's construction. Visitors thus relate technique and skill to objects demonstrating delicate decoration and/or a distinguishing form or shape. In other words, they were looking for immediate pointers to visual pleasure.

➤ **Material (24 out of 342 visitors)**

Few visitors discussed materials and their physical attributes as key elements of their favourite objects. 11 out of 24 visitors looked at how materials work with other art elements in rendering a holistic visual effect, which was likely to be related to qualities such as being nice, delicate and

unusual; seven visitors differentiated between the use of materials and their craftsmanship; and six of them mentioned the material because of personal interest. As one of the research sites, the Schiller gallery, is focused on Chinese ceramic art, it is difficult to determine visitors' preferences on materials. However, it appears that visitors prefer to highlight visual effects created by rare materials, such as jade or ivory.

The theme of technical concern, then, encompasses how visitors look at objects in relation to their construction. Relatively speaking, fewer visitors considered this as a significant criterion in choosing their favourite object. However, this does not imply that they would be indifferent to distinguishing visual effects or qualities constructed in particular materials, or created by well-developed techniques and skills. On the contrary, technical consummation is an immediate pointer to visual pleasure and personal statement. It is the technical details that visitors are less likely to relate to.

In this section, I have examined the elements of visitors' interpretive strategies in relation to the Chinese collections at the BCM and MEAA. It is clear that visitors tend to have limited prior knowledge and that their interactions with the objects are more likely to be responsive to bright colour, delicate design and dramatic representational elements such as figures and animals. Appealing to recognisable subject matter and distinguishing visual qualities, visitors tend to contextualise an object by making an aesthetic statement, describing personal associations or summarising cross-cultural references. This suggests that visitors look for

visual enrichment, technical ingenuity or personal meanings in their processes of meaning making. Although visitors may not be motivated to learn more about the culture, the 'otherness' of the collections suggests a cross-cultural framework and encourages visitors either to refer their favourite objects to signifiers of Chinese culture or to assimilate the collections into a cultural context with which they are familiar. This may confirm their perception of Chinese culture, or show them another dimension of it.

All in all, visitors to the Chinese collections demonstrate interpretive strategies which incline towards instinctive responses to cognitive stimulations and reveal a lack of capacity to communicate with the objects in depth. Certainly, an object speaks to people one way or another; the challenge is that some 'words' may hold a lesser truth than others, especially where, as in this case, object-human relationships are grounded within the context of another culture.

3.4 How do visitors receive an object?

In considering how museums might accommodate the visitors' needs, I have attempted to unpack the nature of cross-cultural viewing. As mentioned, looking is a reciprocal process in which our approach towards looking shapes our sight, and, in return, is modified by the cognitive qualities of an object. Having discussed how visitors approach the Chinese collection and what visual qualities they would look at in communicating with the objects, I now turn to how visitors receive the Chinese collections as a result of this reciprocal process of looking.

3.4.1 The object as art consumption

In response to the ritual space of the museum where collections are displayed for admiration, the majority of visitors make an aesthetic judgement about the formal qualities of an object and/or its craftsmanship. They perceive the Chinese collections as artworks, relating perceptual qualities to the intrinsic aesthetic value of an art object regardless of its socio-cultural origin. Bourdieu defines this instinctive response as moving away from the content of art to its form as 'popular aesthetics', which offers an immediate satisfaction with, and an accessible point of entry to, the work concerned (2004: 32-41). Interestingly, museums are likely to deploy exhibition designs that magnify the visual interest of the objects and elicit visitors' admiration of the forms, but which eschew the contents (Alpers 1991; Pearce 1992: 202-203, 208; Shanks and Tilley 1996: 71-74).

For instance, a visitor explained that she liked a white bowl decorated with a prunus tree 'because of its simplicity and colour. It is a restful piece and could just easily [have] be[en] made yesterday' (MEAA: C072). Looking at the minimal design of this white bowl from the thirteenth century, such an aesthetic approach neutralises the spatio-temporal differences between its origin and the present, and assimilates it into a context of personal taste. No doubt this approach gives the temporal factor a sense of novelty or nostalgia, triggering visitors' curiosity to enquire as to how old an object is. However, it obscures further enquiries into other aspects of the object, such as historical significance or the style of historical production in which collectors or experts would be interested. To a certain extent, seeing

the Chinese collection as artwork dissolves cultural and temporal differences between original and museum contexts into visual qualities, displacing the object-human communication to a universal, yet one-dimensional, realm of timelessness.

At its best, then, an aesthetic viewing, drawing visual qualities to attention, encourages visitors to overcome spatio-temporal differences by looking into sensual pleasure, and even emotional satisfaction in such feelings as restfulness and sublimity. For example, a visitor from the BCM who was fond of a black tea ware with an inscription, said,

'It is that delicate decoration fits in really well with the simple form that retains its simplicity, rather than fights against it. Also, it is not symmetrical, but it gives you a sense of directness. You can almost feel as if you are putting your hands onto it' (C100).

It is obvious that this visitor is well-equipped with the skills that enable him to focus on the formal qualities of the tea ware and feel its materiality, considering the fact that less than one tenth of the visitors felt confident enough to reveal their preferred aesthetic qualities of objects. Despite the visitor's limited knowledge and interest level in the collections and the art itself, such an aesthetic viewing instinctively appeals to visual qualities. Yet the technically-loaded museum text fails to suggest a multi-layered aesthetic viewing of objects. In most cases, it is instead likely to offer facts describing the historical development of the arts, production information, and, occasionally, the cultural significance of the object. In relation to the

black tea wares, the BCM text outlines the development of the genre while the MEAA labels cover kiln site information, production techniques, and the object's functions; yet none of them offers any sensual clues which would show visitors how to interact with the objects.

How then do visitors aestheticise the collection? To make sense of their viewing, visitors are inclined to look at the collections as a personal asset that they would 'live with' or which they believe would 'look good' in their house. Far from being detached from daily life concerns, this form of aesthetic viewing parallels a shopping experience that provokes a desire for possession. For example, one visitor perceived a bronze figure of Garuda as the souvenir he would buy on holiday (MEAA: B169), while another would have liked to have taken home a celadon bowl because its large size would suit her appetite (BCM: C151). The Chinese collections seem to inspire visitors to consider what they would like to own and what they lack in their personal life. Unlike shopping, viewing museum objects does not lead to their becoming part of one's possession; yet it creates such a desire.

Why would an aesthetic experience involve materialistic value? According to psychologists, this desire for possession can be explained by our existential need to direct our consciousness in an organised state (Maslow 1968: 15-31; Csikszentmihalyi 1993: 139-143). As Csikszentmihalyi suggests, an enjoyable experience, such as hiking, talking to friends or looking after one's own children, is fulfilling because these activities lead to one's development of self, enrich lives and gives

confidence for facing the future. In contrast, when we have nothing to do we start ruminating – and that triggers negative feelings, such as self-denial, depression and despair. It could be said of shopping, as much as the museum viewing experience, that these activities require less attention and therefore, we are likely to lend an additional significance to the experiences in order to overcome the existential vacuum (Csikszentmihalyi 2004:100-101). In other words, in assimilating the collection into a visitor's daily life experiences, the desire for possession creates a vague sense of satisfaction. It is a substitute for the experience of enjoyment that convinces the visitor that it is worthwhile looking at a museum object that actually may mean very little to them. In some ways, the process of meaning making is sustained by aestheticising the collections within a personal context – and thus disconnecting from the wider socio-cultural context that would reveal the multi-layered meanings of an object. Interestingly, this desire for possession also drives some visitors to feel privileged that their city houses the BCM's fine collection of Chinese material culture. This somehow suggests that visitors feel the collection belongs to them and is always there for their consumption.

3.4.2 The object as specimen of the culture

Although visitors are likely to take a universalist perspective in looking at collections of art, many of them easily discern the otherness of distinctive decorative motifs and artistic expressions of the collections, and the specific 'Chinese' terminology used in the museum text, such as *clair-de-lune* glaze (the French term for a blue glaze as soft as moonlight) or *kinuta* (the Japanese word for celadon ware). To make sense of the

collections, many visitors tend to receive objects as a specimen that shows them some aspect of the culture. They relate the museum text to recognisable object content including decorations with representational elements, form and shape, in contextualising the object. As many researchers suggest, placing authentic non-Western objects alongside museum reclassification, interpretive text and exhibition designs, contributes to constructing a way of seeing that relates to the culture concerned (Clifford 1988: 201-202; Lidchi 1997; Pearce 1997; Karp and Kratz 2000).

For instance, a visitor who was interested in a court robe worn by a child, said,

‘Wearing a robe like this, you probably can’t do anything, but just stand there or sit still. I admire the discipline and training Chinese people put onto children. You can’t have this nowadays’ (BCM: T001).

Relating the robe to the museum text on its usage, the visitor concluded that the court robe demonstrated how Chinese parenting skills emphasise discipline. By assigning inverted meaning to dressing up, a familiar practice, she sharpens the differences between traditional Chinese culture and its modern, British counterpart. This cultural viewing, associating recognisable elements with ‘otherness’, triggers the visitors’ curiosity and a sense of eye-opening in digging into the distinctive cultural significance of the object. Perceiving the collection to be signifying Chinese culture, visitors are likely to notice those objects which are unfamiliar to European perspectives and

relate these 'unique' qualities to 'Chineseness'. To give a few examples, a polychrome vase decorated with eight immortals demonstrated to a visitor what traditional Chinese people would wear, instead of being an artistic representation of mythical figures (BCM: C027). Many visitors found a quirky figure appealing for its 'Chineseness' and mystery about what it is (BCM: I108), and, interestingly, few of them considered that its strangeness is due to poor craftsmanship. Also, visitors assumed that the decoration of figures and landscape on a lacquer box would be more than an exquisite motif. Like the famous Willow pattern, they believed, it would tell a story (MEAA: L179). There is an excess of meaningfulness in such an interpretive approach, which risks making wrong assumptions about what an object can reveal and neglects the sensory experience embodied by an object.

How might a museum resolve this? To facilitate visitors' meaning-making processes museums are likely to draw on popular icons, including the dragon, or distinctive cultural practices such as tea drinking, in deciphering the otherness of Chinese collections. For example, the dragon display at the BCM explains various aspects of this prevalent Chinese symbol, such as its role in nature, its political significance and its relationship with other animals, according to Chinese mythology and literature. On the other hand, the MEAA, as its art-education orientation suggests, explains how Chinese artists portrayed depth, perspective and scale through decorations depicting figures and landscape scenery. Certainly these museum interpretations offer informative accounts about the object in answering some of the queries visitors may have. Indeed,

these interpretations address the questions on content and function, but do not elaborate on either cultural meaning or artistic expression – thus ignoring the fact that visitors' viewing is closely related to contemporary concerns, including popular cultural perceptions. To a certain extent, then, museum interpretation pinpoints the otherness without deciphering the logic of difference, thus rendering it open to misinterpretation (Karp 1991; Coombes 1998; Hallam 2000).

3.4.3 The object as a reflection of self

One should not be misled into thinking that visitors who recognise the otherness of the collection are necessarily interested in understanding the culture. As discussed, apart from enthusiastic learners and a few curious viewers, visitors show limited interest in knowing more about the Chinese culture. Obviously, the object is a signifier of the culture and yet the point of entry is based on curatorial interpretation that is informed by the Western system of knowledge making and the visitor's concerns about contemporary Western society (Clifford 1988: 220-221; Karp and Wilson 1996: 262-265; Hides 1997; Pagani 1998). To a certain extent, the otherness of the Chinese material culture stimulates visitors in comparing against and reflecting on the host culture. Meaning created by this cultural viewing is self-sustained in the sense that it would only refer to the host culture, rather than enable one to look beyond the boundaries. For example, when looking at Chinese landscape painting, a visitor thought the Chinese artistic expressions were 'primitive' and 'fragmented' and seemed 'like really early European paintings, even before the Renaissance' (MEAA 20 May 2006). Identifying different manners of expression in painting does

not offer the visitor any clues to understanding their differences. On the contrary, the dichotomy between the others and self are likely to conform to one's cultural perception, rather than decipher the myth of it. In some ways, the Chinese collection would be perceived of as a reflection of self, through looking at the other.

How might a museum collection signify both the other and the self together? According to Homi Bhabha (1994), 'self' and 'other' is a dialectic concept interweaving heterogeneously in a circulating relationship which distinguishes one's boundaries. He suggests,

'In the objectification of the scopic drive there is always the threatened return of the look; in the identification of the imaginary relation there is always the alienating other (or mirror) which crucially returns its image to the subject; and in that form of substitution and fixation that is always the trace of loss, absence' (1994b:116).

Identities or identifications are fluid and hybrid in that there is no essential dichotomy between self and others. In other words, the other is entangled with the self. Due to this intimate relationship, the self tends to fix its gaze on the other, the mirror image in ensuring one's boundary. However, such a differentiation would trigger a reciprocal response, which is strange and yet familiar in a sense that threatens its own identity. This, as Bhabha argues, either confirms the fixed image of the self or triggers a self-defence programme – the root of cross-cultural misunderstandings. Considering this in the museum context, the Chinese collections in the BCM and MEAA

are cultural hybrids demonstrating Chinese sensibilities in the context of British rationality and connoisseurship. Looking at the Chinese collections is a process of identification that looks for what 'otherness' is and is not to define Britishness. A cross-cultural viewing like this can be understood as a journey of self-exploration to fulfil deep psycho-cultural needs in an individual context.

In fact, the tension between the self and others is double-fold: the differences between Chinese and Western culture are magnified through the temporal gap of a traditional and modern society. According to interviews, visitors are interested in Chinese symbolism, traditional practices, politics in communist China and how traditional culture is preserved in contemporary society; visitors see these not only as elements of Chinese culture, but also as a reflection of what the contemporary United Kingdom is not. One of the obvious examples is that when they draw upon the technical ingenuity of the Chinese collection, many visitors value traditional handicraft over the mechanical mass production of the modern age. Also, when they consider the functions of some of the objects, like intellectual utensils and delicate tea ware, visitors compare the sophisticated approach to mundane life in the past to the fast-food life style of contemporary culture. It is clear that the Chinese collection triggers both their curiosity to decipher other cultures, as well as nostalgia towards a world long passed. In other words, they are looking at the self of the moment through the objects of traditional China.

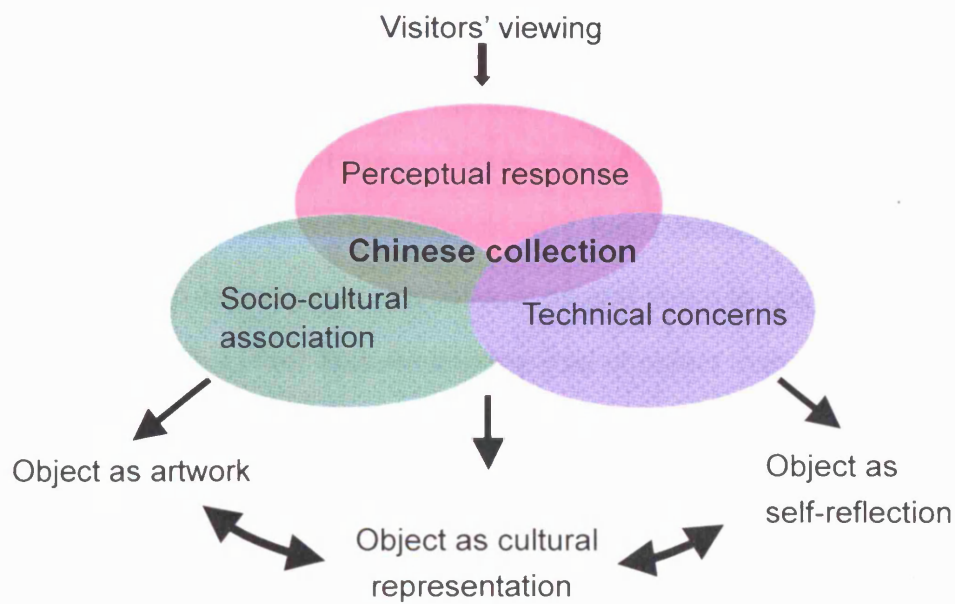


Figure 3.5 Visitors viewing experiences in relation to Chinese collection

When they look at Chinese collections, the visitors' reception oscillates across a spectrum perceiving the Chinese objects as artworks, representations of a culture, and a reflection of self which can be categorised into tactics of assimilation and differentiation (figure 3.5). Whether visitors take one particular approach of looking or whether they shift from aesthetic to cultural viewing and back, the meaning-making process is a personal one that creates a desire for possession, a curiosity for identifying others and the self, and/or nostalgia towards the past. In this process, museums offer few sensual clues that suggest what to look at, and few cross-cultural references to associate the collection with contemporary life experiences. Instead, they are likely to offer static and technically loaded interpretations fixing the collection within a particular spatio-temporal context that conforms to cultural perceptions and, in some ways, confines the objects within a one-dimensional approach to viewing.

3.5 Museum mode of meaning making

This chapter set out to examine the reciprocal mechanism of cross-cultural viewing in the context of museum exhibition. As personal interests, expectations and motivation vary, most visitors show little interest and motivation in relation to the collections and seem to look for novelty in their viewing. To further enquire into the role of object in this process of cross-cultural viewing, I have used interviews and visitors' commentaries to examine what formal qualities of objects speak to visitors and how visitors interpret these experiences. Given the constraints of their limited interpretive repertoires of Chinese culture or art, the visitors' interpretive strategies are the result of their instinctive responses to cognitive stimulations. They are interested in figures and mythical animal sculptures, and in pieces with bright colours, delicate designs or dramatic representational decorations. Drawing on recognisable content and distinctive visual qualities, they are likely to assimilate an object into a universal context of art or to differentiate it within a cross-cultural context for self-exploration. Nonetheless, the meaning-making process appears to be one-dimensional, in the sense that it creates a false sense of satisfaction, encouraging meanings to be a reflection of personal desire and a simplistic perception of others.

It is obvious that cross-cultural communication is difficult, if not impossible. The otherness embodied by the collection, and the visitors' lacking of prior knowledge and interest in the collection, and above all static museum interpretations that fail to address visitors' needs, all contribute to this cultural detachment of the Chinese collection. Clearly, an alternate

proposal of interpretation is needed to suggest a more fluid object-human communication. In the next chapter, I turn to perceptual phenomenology to propose a communicative interpretation of material culture that encourages a sensual viewing that dissolves cultural boundaries by urging visitors to experience the collection reflectively, rather than look at it judgmentally.

Chapter 4

Speaking for Objects: a Phenomenological Perspective

4.1 Objects come to life

In the movie *Night at the Museum* (20th century Fox 2006), Larry, the new security guard of the American Museum of Natural History, discovers that the magic of an Egyptian tablet has brought the collection to life during the night. The *Tyrannosaurus rex* skeleton runs around, an Easter Island Moai babbles and, even worse, some of the objects attack each other and Larry during his shift. Although these 'living' objects are animated by their own will and physically interact with people, they speak an incomprehensible language that Larry cannot understand. The story represents the conventional view that museum objects are dead in the sense that they are irrelevant to daily life experiences and their significance is gradually forgotten by contemporary society. Though the collection is brought to life by magic, it remains a ghostly presence, incapable of engaging people in meaningful dialogue. Ironically, the movie takes an interesting twist when the media discover that some of the 'living' objects have sneaked out of the museum. People compare this to the publicity stunts of the museum and their interest in the much-neglected collection is ignited. The museum collection, therefore, becomes 'alive' as people become aware of the objects and are willing to understand what they are trying to say.

An object speaks through its materiality, and yet due to their own limited prior knowledge or the obscurity of the object's relevance to daily

experiences, few visitors appreciate this 'tactile expression' of objects. It is interesting that the *Night at the Museum* movie plays with the idea that, whether or not the museum collection is living, the key to establishing a meaningful object-human relationship lies in people's interest in communicating with the collection. How might a museum facilitate this?

As I have already described, in emphasising the reciprocal nature of looking I define material culture as an 'object-human manifold' shaped by the viewer's prior knowledge and personal experiences, and by the formal qualities of the object. A meaningful dialogue between object and visitors should not be a one-way communication. I argue that empowering objects to speak is as important to visitors' meaning-making processes as helping visitors to understand objects' languages. However, recent focus on visitors' needs and interests has led to many studies of visitors' reception and interpretation strategies of the collection, which take a limited account of the objects' point of view (Hooper-Greenhill 1994; Serrell and Adams 1998; MacDonald 2002; Sandell 2007). How might an object become alive to visitors? What is the role of objects in engaging museum visitors in a sensory dynamic dialogue? How could a lived object-human relationship be developed in a museum context?

In this chapter, I draw upon Merleau-Ponty's perceptual phenomenology and other material culture theories to explore the possibilities for a museological approach of objecthood. I start with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological world view of 'being-in-the-world' in order to clarify the intersubjectivity of an object and to outline the view that

an object speaks through bodily interaction with people. Turning then to Chinese material culture, I implement Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'living body' in order to redefine an object as a captivating agency that engages visitors in a reciprocal interaction between body and materiality. I argue that highlighting materiality would encourage visitors to connect with an object's perceptual qualities through their own bodily experiences, which in turn would help reveal the humanity embodied by the object. This museological approach of objects attempts to bring objects to 'life' by asking visitors to look at an object sensuously, and to shape museum exhibitions into a forum for communication between contemporary society and lives from various contexts as embodied by the collection.

4.2 Being in the world of things

Merleau-Ponty (1962: 5) is concerned that 'we are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world'. His philosophical project thus focuses on giving perception primacy, enabling it to operate within a matrix of objects, persons and situations, as an extension of our mind, metaphorically drawing the world to us (Kelly 2005: 98-99). In this respect, Merleau-Ponty's perceptual phenomenology illuminates how a museum object reveals itself to us and makes an object-human encounter an organic totality. His perception theory illuminates the object-human relationship, helps us explain how an object 'speaks', and provides a phenomenological model for looking at a museum collection as artwork.

4.2.1 Being in the world

To material culturalists, Merleau-Ponty's theory suggests that objects speak for themselves through our perception. He denies that we have innate knowledge that constructs our understanding of objects. For example, a 26-layer hollowed-out ivory ball of openwork demonstrates ingenious craftsmanship which is likely to draw visitors' attention, even to those who have little prior knowledge or interest in Chinese decorative art. Curious enough, my fieldwork in BCM finds that visitors, who have not seen an intricate object like the ivory ball before, tend to express greater interest in the artefact than those 'experienced' viewers, one of whom stated, 'that's nothing spectacular. I have seen this before' (19 November 2007). Clearly, objects cannot be understood in our mind alone, and in some cases it is our ignorance that creates novelty out of such an object-human encounter, in heightening our sensory pleasures (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 33). Stressing the objectivity of the phenomenal world and its impact on our perception, Merleau-Ponty, however, does not agree there is an absolute truth about the phenomenal world, in which we learn about objects through definite atomistic sense data, that eventually lead us to an objective overview. Taking our established perception and prior knowledge into account, it is impossible for us to communicate with an object in an initially unbiased manner. For instance, lack of context or insufficient lighting may incorrectly lead a visitor to mistake a blue and white export ware produced from China as a Wedgewood piece decorated in a similar style. This shows that our knowledge of an external world can be acquired through the sense experiences, which are grounded by our common sense of the object perceived and the objective conditions of perception

(Merleau-Ponty 1962: 7-8). To dissolve the dichotomy between objectivity of things and subjectivity of our perceptions, Merleau-Ponty proposes the notion of 'lived body'.

According to Merleau-Ponty (1962: 94), the body is a 'vehicle of being in the world' that mediates between subject and object, and consciousness and materiality, enabling one to be interwoven in the phenomenon world. The body is not a separate part of our being which provides us with sense data about our surroundings, but a living organism that draws us into the world and enables the world to communicate with us. As Merleau-Ponty argues, 'I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it, we are our bodies' (1962: 173). He uses the phenomenon of a phantom limb as an example to illustrate this.

As physiological evidence has shown, patients who have had a limb amputated may still feel the sensation from the missing limb and continue to act instinctively as though it is still there in any given situation where use of the missing limb is needed. Merleau-Ponty (1962: 92-93) argues that if our body could be separated from our mind, patients would live on without feeling the urge to use the limbs. In fact, this phenomenon demonstrates that our body and consciousness comprise an integrated operation of sense, which enables us to connect our mind and the 'external' world. It is our bodies, or precisely, our bodily perceptions, that encounter an overlapping experience between the world of things and us, and enable us to be conscious of various possibilities in relation to our surroundings. Merleau-Ponty proves that our body is immanent, engaging

us in the world of things as an extension of mind; and also transcendent, shaping our sensory experiences according to the objects we encounter.

Arguing from the premise that our body is the centre of the world, Merleau-Ponty further suggests that our sense of being is not only an organic totality of mind and body, but also correlative within a matrix of objects, people and situations. He states,

'The system of experiences is not arrayed before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception' (1962: 354).

We can never experience the world out of our bodies; and objects from the world only exist when they are experienced by us. We are not detached entities, but involved in the world within a body that can only see things from certain particular perspectives in a particular content. Even an element of our sensation stimulation is not an atomic definite. For instance, a shade of blue does not exist in its own right; rather, it is a colour of *something* that feels different in various textures (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 365). In other words, we are enmeshed in a matrix of things with our being only understood in relation to the world. These bodily experiences are intersubjective, partial and in flux, enabling inexhaustible possibilities which unfold to us. To Merleau-Ponty, this state of 'in-betweenness' interweaving subjective self with objective world, heightens our sense of

being, in rediscovering ourselves and experiencing the multi-layered phenomenon world to its fullest extent.

4.2.2 Object speaks

Merleau-Ponty contends that the in-betweenness of our bodies on the one hand mediates our mind and body, for it operates in the world of things as an extension of the mind; on the other hand, it engages us into the world through sensory experiences. Living intimately within a matrix of objects, we could find the sensory world stimulating, but also confusing and difficult. How do we communicate with objects in making sense of the world?

According to Merleau-Ponty (1962: 45, 275), an object can be defined as an 'organism of colours, smells, sounds and tactile appearances' and body as another form of object which is also sensitive to these sensory stimulations. Highlighting the sensations our bodies experience through an object-human relationship, he justifies his claim that humans understand the 'tactile language' of an object because both parties actually share the same means of communication. In addition to this shared 'language', Merleau-Ponty (1968a: 123) argues that objects are alive in the sense that they are an extension of our being. He observes that when we look at something, our body is looked at. This reciprocity of object-human communication suggests that materiality shapes our bodily perception of the world and reveals part of ourselves, such as feelings, thoughts, or desires, through this bodily experience. We may not have prior knowledge or personal experiences relating to an object but by feeling its materiality,

the double sensations of our bodies are absorbed into a dialogue with the object.

Ontologically and materially, objects 'speak' to us. However, why do some people fail to discern the tactile language? Merleau-Ponty (1968a: 123) holds that to see an object properly, one should be capable of being seen; and to feel intimately, one should feel being touched by the object. We are enmeshed by the world of things, and yet we are also living within our 'closed space' that enables us to choose how we would like to interact with the world. The problem is that though our bodies have an intrinsic understanding of the tactile language of objects, we tend to experience objects as an indeterminate background in the sense that we are not explicitly aware of our bodily perception (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 347). For example, while we are working on our desk, our hands easily navigate through piles of books and other stationery to pick up a pen without even looking for it. Because of the familiarity of our living environment and our habitual gestures as informed by our personal experiences, this pre-reflective perception guides our bodies through most of our daily routines, and yet it lacks reflectivity to explore the inexhaustible possibilities of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 425).

In response to our indifference to objects, Merleau-Ponty suggests that bringing reflectivity into our daily life perception is the key to tactile language. He observes that pre-reflective perception is a spontaneous bodily response, serving as our primordial contact with the world. Embodying sedimentation of our personal history, its spontaneity reveals

the carnal side of our being, embracing tactile expressions, passion and feelings (1962: 150). As our bodily perception highlights feelings instead of thinking, Merleau-Ponty (1968a: 127) argues that it helps us to grasp tactile language in experiencing the density of the world, because the fundamental phenomenon of the world is that it is an organic totality in which objects and people interweave within a tempo-spatial context. It is made of the same 'flesh' as our bodies, and is an intersubjective being embracing both materiality and consciousness. Hence, Merleau-Ponty (1968b: 35) suggests that reflective bodily perception 'turns back over the density of the world in order to clarify it, but ... coming second, reflects back to it only its own light'. In other words, the tactile language of objects is understood by the heightening of our senses in choosing different ways to relate to the world.

4.2.3 Seeing things through an artist's eyes

It is interesting that Merleau-Ponty (1962: 174) refers to our bodies as works of art that are only understood through sensory stimulations. Art, particularly painting, is one of his projects to demonstrate how engaging with artwork cultivates our bodily perception in feeling the flesh of the world with reflectivity.

Aiming to demonstrate how art illuminates our perception, Merleau-Ponty starts his art theory by examining why art is created. As mentioned, we are used to a world of things and convinced that they exist unshakably. On the other hand, when receiving mixed stimulations we find the world appears to consist of crude impressions lingering painfully, but nothing

meaningful can be uttered (Merleau-Ponty 1993a: 66). Struggling to make sense of life, artists start their quest through their bodily perceptions and create works that convey apperception of our daily encountering. Merleau-Ponty states,

‘The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things’ (1993a:68).

Artists are insightful in presenting us with aspects of the primordial world, which many of us would otherwise ignore. Merleau-Ponty finds creation to be ‘a process of expressing’ in which the artist fuses vague fever, strong emotion, rich sensation and intellectual thought into intuitive action in seeking a perceptual answer to his/her confusion about life (1993a: 69; 1993c: 130). This artistic exploration of the ‘flesh’ of the world is dynamic, frantic and complex and the outcome may be understood as an embodiment of the artist’s doubt, but not necessarily his/her ‘sensible answer’ to life.

Nonetheless, an artwork embodies the artist’s bodily action, passion and conscious reflection; its materiality realises that there is a halfway point between perception and reflection. It is itself a sensuous statement of how the artist experiences the world through his/her unique perspective, offering new insights into our engagement with life (Merleau-Ponty 1993b: 88). Compared with the matrix of objects we encounter in our daily life, an

artwork conveys a sense of strangeness that motivates viewers to receive it through a tactile mode of thinking – to sense, to feel and to be touched by art in relation to our condition of being (1993a: 68, 70). On the one hand, an artwork is accomplished by the artist in a particular spatio-temporal context; on the other, it remains in flux and open to any viewer for the re-creation of meanings (1993b: 105, 114). Hence, the significance of art is twofold: offering sensuous enjoyment in an artwork itself, and inspiring us to see objects through an artist's eyes and to be conscious of our being within the world of things.

Theorising the relationship between our bodily perceptions and reflective faculty, Merleau-Ponty's theory of art is inspiring in considering how art objects could be exhibited within a museum context. He suggests that an artwork is an artist's embodiment of the world, which can only be understood through physical engagement. The major criterion for defining art is that it conveys a sense of novelty that illuminates its perceptual qualities in understanding the world from the artist's perspective. However, as Merleau-Ponty is focused on using painting as an example of his ontology of art, he is not explicit regarding how to distinguish artwork from other daily life objects. In this respect, Michael Fried (1998: 151), the art theorist, has refined Merleau-Ponty's theoretical position by proposing that an artwork should 'suspend its own objecthood' in magnifying its perceptual qualities for aesthetic appreciation. In other words, regardless of the fact that an artwork is made of ready-made items, icons from popular culture, or anything else, it can be considered to be 'art' if it inspires us to experience the artist's world with reflectivity. This suggests

that craft, photographs, rock music and television comedies should be included in the family of art – thus dissolving a hierarchical division between high and low culture. Such an inclusive definition of art in a museum context also challenges authoritative curatorship in urging us to reflect upon what art is, what it is for and who has the right to interpret it. Objects should speak not only to curators, but to everyone in various ways.

Inspired by perceptual phenomenology, I hold that Chinese material culture is the physical embodiment of a foreign culture fused with the artist's creativity, cultural practices, and aesthetic sensibilities. Serving as daily life objects from the past, these artefacts embody various aspects of philosophical significance in bringing new light into our being. First, these 'decorative art' objects engage viewers in an appreciation of how the design conforms to function in their cultural context. As Paul Crowther (2001: 5) suggests, function in applied art should be understood as subject-matter in representational art; a Chinese collection can prompt viewers to feel how the perceptual qualities present function, sensuously. Second, like other genres of art, Chinese art collections embody a process of expression, which shows viewers how the artist's bodily actions work with the medium within an aesthetic tradition. Technically, the making of these artefacts is a bodily reflection towards materiality in relation to its function and cultural values. Historically, it is also a sensuous dialogue between an artist and his/her predecessors, in exploring the technical and artistic possibilities of how to develop a shared pool of cultural resources. In short, my approach shows how Chinese collections, such as ceramics and bronzes, were created, used and valued by people. These art objects

prompt viewers to experience the traditional Chinese approach to their natural and cultural environment, eventually reflecting the viewers' sense of being.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of art, highlighting bodily engagement as the key to aesthetic appreciation, justifies a theoretical approach to this project. According to Merleau-Ponty, art is not simply a piece of work, rather it is a bodily engagement with life that 'becomes a universal means of understanding and of making something understood, of seeing and of presenting something to see' (Merleau-Ponty 1993b: 89-90; Johnson 1993: 33). Seeing is to be seen. We see an artwork as an extension of our self, which informs us about ourselves; meanwhile, the work also brings to the surface our 'objectification' – such as our taste, knowledge and aesthetic judgment about the work itself (Jones 2003: 83). All this suggests that museum visits are more than browsing through nice objects and referring to museum text. Bodily perceiving objects is a process of the realisation of ourselves and the work. To enable objects to speak, I argue that museum interpretation should encourage visitors to draw on their own sensuous imaginations and common life experiences in communicating with artworks through the notion of tactile language that this thesis is expounding.

Merleau-Ponty's perceptual phenomenology assists in the theorising of how object-human communication can be operated through tactile language. According to Merleau-Ponty, we should be conscious of our living bodies – our means of connection to the world of objects and

people – and art is one of those inspiring agents that illuminate our perception of the world with reflectivity. He suggests that art brings an immediate sensuous experience to attentive viewers that convey diverse meanings, such as aesthetic sensibilities, the artist's creativity and the viewer's personal experiences. His notion offers theoretical grounds for justifying the rationale of this research project: looking at Chinese objects as artworks in a historically-grounded aesthetic approach, is a sensuous dialogue offering visitors sensory pleasure as well as a reflection of our condition of being in this phenomenal world.

4.3 What is an object?

In regards to Chinese material culture in museums, object-human communication does not result in absorbed aesthetic pleasures, or more understanding about the host and other cultures, as the visitor studies in the previous chapter showed. In response to this uninspiring dialogue, Merleau-Ponty's notion suggests that bodily involvement is the key to reconnecting visitors' sense of being within the world of the museum. It also suggests the object is not a 'neutral' physical being; rather it can be defined as an active enterprise, interweaving with diverse human experiences. In considering what objects might offer to visitors, therefore, I turn now to material culture theories in order to explore a more vigorous definition for the object.

A number of authors have focused on how objects shape human culture by questioning whether they constitute a form of subjectivity or an agency of their own (Gell 1998; Latour 1999; Dobres and Robb 2000; Dant

2005). Alfred Gell devised a delicate framework to examine an art object and its relationship with the artist (its maker), its index (its own material and physical attributions), its prototype (its origin, which may be related to some kind of cultural resources) and the recipient (its user or audience), in terms of agent / patient relationship. By examining which involved factor initiates action ascribed to the object, he suggests various approaches to looking at an object, including forms and styles, artistic tradition and social production activities.

Informed by phenomenological ontology and Gell's agency theory, in the sections below I explore the museum mechanism of object-human communication by considering how artwork extends human agency within a matrix of social relations through history. First, I demonstrate that art objects embody human bodily perceptions, social significance and/or cultural practices within a particular span of time and space. Next, I argue that a museum object is transformed into a vehicle of human experience by bringing new dimensions of looking at culture in relation to human intention, actions, and environment. As Gell suggests, material culture studies should return to the object *per se*; this discussion is an attempt to demonstrate that the sensuous experiences we share with objects infuse diverse meanings into our cultures.

4.3.1 The object as extended 'self'

Myriads of objects fuse into our lives to fulfil our needs or desires and assign meanings to our world. In fact, we are so used to living within a world of things that that we rarely consider its existence and the extent to

which objects shape our practices and cultures – thus further stimulating desires for possessions and the production of new meanings (Gell 1998; Ingold 2000; Miller 2005). Given this intimate relationship between object and human life, how does an object extend our personhood? This discussion explores how objects act as tools, identity icons and emotional pacifiers, and process human agency in structuring our bodily perceptions and behaviours.

Without human involvement, objects are generally considered to be mute, inanimate and mindless things conforming to scientific logic. However, phenomenological ontology suggests that objects exist in a state of in-betweenness that cannot be extricated from the human world.

According to Merleau-Ponty,

‘The thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually *in itself* [emphasis in original] because its articulations are those of our very existence, and because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity’ (1962: 373).

The phenomenological presence of objects is interwoven with our bodily perception, and therefore highlights the human condition of being and assigns meanings to human culture. At a basic level, art objects, like many daily life items, are created to serve a particular function and are therefore empowered to act on behalf of human beings (Gell 1998: 6). It is our intentions, the human agency embedded in our actions, that elicit

sensuous experiences which reveal the interaction between the materiality of an object and our bodily perception. In other words, an artwork can be considered as a bodily auxiliary in materialising our intention (Gell 1998: 20-21; Merleau-Ponty 1962: 152).

For example, conventional forms of Chinese tableware demand certain etiquette; this suggests that eating is more an intimate sensory experience than simply ingesting food. A rice bowl, shaped with a flare mouth and foot rim, rests comfortably in one's hand, bringing the food closer to oneself in order to feel the warmth and aroma. It is also recommended that a porcelain bowl with a simple design would be a piece of delectable tableware to flesh out the colours of the rice and various elements of the dish (Yuan 1913 [1716-1798]: 3a; Wang 1994: 334-335). Hence, a rice bowl materialises the human intention of serving a hot meal, so enabling better appreciation of the food, and can therefore be understood as an extension of our bodily perceptions and potential action. To a certain extent, the use of a rice bowl encourages Chinese table manners in serving dishes with larger plates placed in the centre of a round table, so that one has a few bites from every plate. It helps to create an enjoyable eating space, which is both individual and communal in the sense that one feels free to taste various combinations of food according to personal preference and also socialise with others by sharing the dishes. Daily life objects, like tableware, further organise our habits in a natural way that we may not be aware of, for example, holding a rice bowl while eating or managing a pair of chopsticks to pick up food; in fact, our bodies need to develop certain kinds of manners, knowledge or skills. In this

sense, artworks, especially decorative art objects, are the extension of our bodily synthesis to bridge our needs and the social life of the world. They extend our physical bodies as well as help to transform us into social beings.

Acting as a sort of tool, art objects thus extend human agency while schooling our bodies into appropriate habits, manner or actions to fulfil our needs. Psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1981: 27-28) suggests that this process of managing our actions with objects, such as juggling a ball with the side of one's foot or building a closet out of 'do-it-yourself' pieces, develops different physical and intellectual strengths for an agreeable performance. Gradually, objects we have been working with enable us to develop different skills and understand more about our strengths and weakness. These objects can be understood as icons of self-identity that contribute to our self-development. For example, a Chinese painter might be adept at expressing him/herself through coordinating movements of wrist, arm and brushes to create lines, shades and textures on a specific degree of weight of paper. A musician, on the other hand, makes his/her artistic statement by pressing down the strings of a zither with one hand and plucking up and down the strings with the other. Skill-intensive activities, like ink painting and playing a zither, demand vigorous object-human interaction to the extent that the brush or the zither is no longer an ordinary instrument, but one that is involved in the activity of a particular style signifying the artist. Shi Tao, the famous 17th century painter, stated that uniting with ink and brush enables the artist to transmit everything, old and new, into a distinguished style and instil life into his work. In his view,

when one is immersed in an act of painting, 'the brush is not brush, the ink not ink, the painting not painting, I am in it myself' (2005: 190-191). By the same token, the 19th century musician Zhu Fengjie suggests that consummation of skills is achieved when one's heart and hands correspond to the extent that one forgets the strings and fingering techniques and absorbs into the totality of the music (Zhu 1995 [1885]: 3.30b-31a). It is the sensuous experiences of uniting with ink and brush or merging with the zither into the music, that enable the artist to infuse passion, talent and personality into the objects and leave his/her signature on the world. By mastering the ink and brush or the zither to such an extent that one feels attached to them, these objects become possessions of ours or even part of ourselves, defining who we are.

In addition to self-development, our possession is another expression of power that demonstrates our capacity to accumulate economic and/or cultural capital. Simply owning a rare item or using it in a particular manner differentiates us from or associates us with certain groups, so establishing a desirable social status (Csikszentmihalyi 1981: 29-33). In Chinese tradition, collecting antiques is considered to be an intellectual pursuit of aesthetic and spiritual cultivation, rather than an ostentatious display of wealth. In a Chinese elitist notion of connoisseurship, appropriating a piece of artwork within one's living quarters is no less important than studying aesthetic qualities and the historicity of the collection. During the late Ming dynasty, connoisseur literature written by scholars, such as Gao Lian's *Leisure Remarks on Aesthetic Appreciation* and Wen Zhenhen's *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, outlined aesthetic applications of antiques

in living quarters in order to create a realm where they could be appreciated at leisure, both sensuously and spiritually (Clunas 1991: 13-39).

For instance, flower arrangement does not merely serve as an interior decoration, but is an intellectual means of bringing art and nature into everyday life. Gao suggests that flower arrangement is a harmonious union of plants and vase in relationship to the surrounding environment and natural world. To highlight the intellectual notion of simplicity and sophistication, flowers should be emaciated and curious, conforming to natural beauty, whilst classic vessels should be selected from Ding ware, Ge ware, Longquan ware and Jun ware. For autumn displays, he proposes potting a yellow chrysanthemum flower alongside a piece of stone in a small white vessel to confer a sense of serenity (Gao [c. 1500] 1975: 232-233). Wen's treatise further details guidelines for selecting appropriate vessels: vases for a scholar's studio should be short and tiny; bronze vessels should be used in spring and winter, while in summer and autumn it would be more appropriate to use ceramics; gold or silver ware would be considered kitsch, and vases in pairs or decorated with rings should be avoided because such usage would make the composition rather clumsy (Wen [1585-1645] 1975: 10.241-242; Clunas 1991: 44).

In terms of plants, Wen also suggests that the composition should inspire the viewer to identify with beauty in all art forms, notably painting. If using a cut branch, it must be selected to be curious and antique; if there are two, their relative heights must be suitable (*ibid*). To Chinese

connoisseurs, flower arrangement is an artistic interpretation of a natural scene emphasising the rhythm of colour, lines and form, thereby conferring intellectual notions, such as simplicity and classicism, to natural beauty. Looking at the curious composition, smelling the scent of flowers and fondling the vessel, an elegant floral work reveals a scholar's spiritual pursuit of establishing a close relation with nature and defines one's personal taste (Huang 1996: 128, 45). This can be understood as a balance of natural forces and cultural expectation, echoing the scholar's sense of his own place in the world. Through careful selection of objects, including the intellectual, connoisseurs create an intimate and quiet studio space that establishes their superior identity as men of culture and differentiates them from those 'dilettantes' who collect for wealth (Mi 1984 [1051-1107] : 235). In this sense, flower arrangement as part of interior decoration is an agent of social significance, extending the intellectual sensibilities of its owner in embodying his identity as an elitist.

In fact, living within a world of things, our desire for possession is also triggered by an emotional need for soothing. Csikszentmihalyi employs Winnicott's concept of the 'transitional object' to explain the fact that we become attached to an object in resolving conflicts within our inner psyche. In Winnicott's view, a teddy bear or a blanket creates the illusion of a motherly figure, so bringing a sense of security for a baby (Csikszentmihalyi 1981: 23-24; Winnicott 1958: 236). In the case of adults, emotional attachment is far more complicated and subtle than recovering from insecurity. In fact, the ways in which we become attached to a specific object vary and the meanings it triggers are also reversible and

somehow contradictory, depending on the demands of the particular situation, the emotional state of the person and personal history (Dant 2000). Nonetheless, it should be stressed that the emotional comfort we yearn for is not an abstract idea. Either metaphorically or realistically, it is a form of sensuous satisfaction, which can only be fulfilled by materialised being: the perceptual qualities of an object, or the sensuous experiences it conveys (Dant 2005: 62-63).



Figure 4.1 Enamel copper set of kettle and burner, Qing dynasty, 18th century, 36cm H [kettle with handle] and 12 cm H [burner], BCM collection (By Ting W Y V, 11 April 2007)

For example, an enamel copper set of kettle and burner (figure 4.1) appeals to a Somali visitor because it reminds him of 'hospitality and happiness'. He states,

'I have a similar one at home in Somalia, which was given to me by my grandmother. My family always enjoyed having guests and making

tea with a kettle and burner like this, as a special treat after dinner. I recall the days we shared with friends, laughing together' (BCM: M156).

Though the museum kettle and burner set the visitor refers to is not the one he inherited from the family, it has formal qualities similar to the latter and thus brings him memories of having tea with family and friends. The objects make him recall the sensuous experiences of boiling tea, feeling the warmth of steam from the kettle, and holding the handle to pour the beverage for everyone, together with chatting and laughter, relating the family inheritance to the building of personal relationships. Through this similarity, the museum set carries the visitor's past and enables him to realise his emotional and practical relationship with others in Somalia. To the visitor, a new immigrant to the UK, the museum collection acts as an extended 'self' which mediates his past and conveys a sense of happiness. Metaphorically, it is a souvenir of memories (Pearce 1992: 69-72).

The notion of agency, then, attempts to re-shape material culture studies by exploring how objects interweave into our daily life through sensuous experiences. A focus on functionality, such as tea making, suggests that objects do not simply serve as tools in extending our body, but also as possessions, which define us as socio-cultural and emotional beings. Seeing an object as an agent of 'self' helps to integrate personal experiences into a grand narrative of history and enables us to understand its users and/or owner in a wider context.

4.3.2 The object as performative mediator

One of the prominent functions of art is in displaying captivating charm in order to create an aesthetic experience for viewers. Though Gell (1998: 74) eschews the aesthetic properties of art, he does refer to its absorbing effect as the 'technology of enchantment', which can be understood as social consequences resulting from the process of technical production. It is therefore justifiable to explore how the perceptual qualities of an artefact evoke a profound sense of awe in the beholder, bringing insights into the making of the work.

Considering artwork as a 'performance', Gell (1998: 42-43) argues that the perceptual qualities of artwork, such as form and shape, colour and pattern, are individual agents in that they seem to show internal sources of energy which interact with each other to create an impression of 'technical complexity'. When absorbed by this enchanting effect of art, viewers are likely to enquire into how the work came into being, by mimicking the artist's gesture of striking brush strokes, or figuring the appropriate proportion among various paints for the right colour. Unlike conventional art history studies, Gell's approach neither looks for the symbolic meaning of an artwork, nor focuses on artistic genius, in exploring receptive aesthetics. Rather it is an enquiry into the process of creation, which examines the artist's bodily responses to a medium in making an artwork or materialising an intended, enchanting impression (Tanner and Osborne 2007: 9; Gell 1998: 67-69). By highlighting the artist's bodily interaction with a medium, Gell rightly points out the tension between spontaneous effect and deliberate act while the artist works with

a particular medium during the creative process (1998: 46-47).

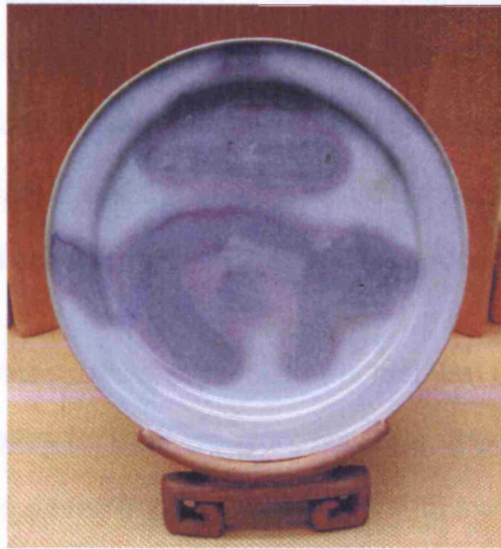


Figure 4.2 Jun plate decorated with purple splashes,
Yuan dynasty, c. early 14th century, 20 cm D
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)

Jun ware featuring substantial variations in the glaze would be an example of how craftsmen explore spontaneous glazing effects using a deliberate plan. Figure 4.2 shows a Jun plate covered in sky blue suffused with purple splashes, like crimson evening clouds drifting across foggy mountains, as many Chinese connoisseurs would remark (Zhou 1998: 28-30; Yu 1999: 6-7). The purple passage suggests that the craftsmen applied copper oxide as a colour agent and then fired the ware, reducing the oxidation atmosphere in the kiln to retain its original hue. The meticulous planning of kiln construction and experiments with the proportion of chemical composition, enable the craftsmen to discover the key to this suffusing effect, and yet the actual result is unpredictable because slight differences in firing temperature, location in the kiln and cooling process change the tint of the colours (Ye 2006: 286-288). It is this

unintentional touch of colours produced by conscious and unconscious faculties that inspires connoisseurs' aesthetic imaginations to explore poetic metaphor in those colours (Zhao 1973: 76-77). The colour variation of the bowl is viewed as a natural impromptu expression, mediating the artist's aesthetic pursuit and the unpredictable nature of materiality, and revealing technical consideration in the creative process.

Many experienced artists appreciate the fact that the accidental effect offers new possibilities for their creation; however, they recognise that it is equally important to develop technique and skill, to master the medium that conducts a particular effect, if one is to express one's ideas properly. As Dant (2005: 111) suggests, the materiality of the medium or the artefact-to-be abducts the artist's bodily actions in order to work with it in specific ways. This requires intensive training that begins with imitating particular postures or using the tools with some form of physical restraint. A novice of Chinese calligraphy should learn to hold the brush by coordinating five fingers. First, the brush should be held vertically with the tight grip of the thumb and middle finger. The index finger stabilises the upper part of the brush whilst the ring and little fingers are placed under the bottom of the shaft to support the middle finger. During the act of writing, the fingers must exert substantial force and yet the palm remains hollow as if holding an egg. This reminds one to execute the strokes forcefully and vigorously and not to grip the brush too tightly, which would hinder its movement (Chen 2003: 44-45). Although one might understand specific approaches of working with the medium and/or tools fairly easily, it is frustrating that such an understanding or verbal instruction offers little help in establishing self-control of the body. It is only through countless,

mind-numbing exercises that the body gradually absorbs a set of routines and develops a tactile sense in order to collaborate with the tools and/or medium without being consciously aware of the procedures (Herzfeld 2004:126-127). A skilful embroidery artist would divide a thin thread into 48 strands and weave the strand with both hands in an even rhythm so that a constant number of stitches would be conducted for the same pattern (Ding 1989 [1927]: 8.13; Shen 1927: 3-4). An accomplished painter would envision any miniature designs in reverse and manipulate a tiny hooked brush to paint from the tight interior space of a snuff-bottle with ease (Little and Silver 1994: viii-ix). This intimate collaboration with the medium and/or tools enables the artist to develop skills and confidence, which will be evaluated tactilely in the finished work. In other words the even and neat stitching of a piece of embroidery work and the smooth and fine lines of an inside-painted snuff-bottle, embody the artist's technique and skill in revealing how their body works with – and to what extent they take control of – the medium.

Enquiry into technical processes also concerns the social fabric of a community working with an art medium. In a workshop environment, the production facilities contextualise the working space and regulate a set of routines for team members to collaborate with each other for the common goal – becoming part of the production process (Dant 2005:111). This is critical in studying decorative art or ceremonial objects, which are produced by anonymous artist/s according to a prescribed set of instructions, such as the porcelains from the Jingdezhen imperial kiln and the ritual portraits of emperors conducted by Chinese court artists. In

these cases, the artists' autonomy was compromised in that they were detached from the creative process with their involvement guided by prototypes in various forms. Nonetheless, the intentionality of artists, as social beings working in a collective process, is revealed by the social network mediating between artists, art medium and patron-recipient during the production of art. In other words artworks, the finished products of technical process, act as effective mediators for enquiring into the social characteristics and significance of art production.



**Figure 4.3 Polychrome vase with pomegranate and magpie,
Qing dynasty, c. 18th century, 36 cm H. BCM collection
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)**

Looking at a polychrome vase (figure 4.3), we appreciate its perceptual qualities, including the translucent and refined texture of the porcelain body, different layers of coloured glazing conferring a poetic touch, and asymmetric composition of pomegranate trees and magpies

accentuating the globular form, and we see how these dissolve into a vivid brush painting that enhances a three-dimensional viewing of the vase as an organic whole. The exquisite qualities of the vase and notably the imperial reign mark inscribed on its base, suggest that it was produced by an imperial workshop from Jingdezhen. It is said that each piece of porcelain probably went through more than 20 procedures conducted by 70 workers (Kerr 1986: 35-37; Lan 1991[1870]: 1.53-64; Zhu 1994 [1774]: 1.63-84). For example, painting polychrome decoration was divided into smaller tasks including designing the prototype, outlining decoration, mixing coloured glazes, and filling in colours and applying overglaze, with each craftsman excelling in his single task (Lan 1991: 3.82; Zhu 1994: 1.2-13). This meticulous division of labour enables the team to work in a mechanical manner, and each of the members develops a bodily response to the materiality that helps them fit into their job efficiently.

Two examples will demonstrate how the perceptual qualities of the vase embody a collectivity in its technical production. Firstly, the perceptual qualities of porcelain, such as the translucent white body, shed light on the pre-modern mode of mass production. Quarried from the Mountain Kaolin, porcelain stone was cracked and ground into fine powder by a team of workers. Next, the raw materials were washed down from the mountain slope by streams through several ditches with sieving gates, to washing ponds on different levels. In the course of flushing, coarse impurities sank to the bottom of the trough, while fine clay flowed into the washing ponds one-by-one, for further precipitation. As the workshop structure was adapted to the mountain landscape, this process of clay

refinement did not require direct human involvement. When the clay-fluid thickened, it was taken out to settlement tanks and ladled by another team of workers to achieve a certain degree of plasticity according to the specific shaping requirement of the porcelain forms to be made (Zhu 2004: 61-69, 76-78; Bai 1999: 28-33). This transformation of hard porcelain stone to resilient clay was thus achieved through the coordination of the physical strength of various workers and the water-motor mechanism – and the smooth biscuit body of the finished form manifests the summation of the technicality of processing clay, an interrelationship between the natural environment and the making of porcelain.

The effect of a ceramic object's art elements is a materialised, sensuous display of the artist's technique and skills in working with the materials. In my second example, the dramatic form of the vase implies that in mastering their throwing skills the potters were familiar with the low plasticity of porcelain clay. Following the motion of the rotating wheel, the potter first established a base by slightly pressing the clay to flow freely between fingers, then he held the outer wall with one hand and pushed from the inside to shape the clay body with the other. To a certain extent, porcelain clay has resistance to being shaped, and yet the potter developed a bodily sense to enable him to handle the unstable clay together with managing the wheel rotating at high speeds so that a desirable form was created, despite its durability and shrinkage rate, after drying and firing (Huanan gongxueyuan *et al* 1981: 77-78). The globular form of the vase is thus a performative mediator, demonstrating bodily interaction between potter and the medium.

However, porcelain making is an art of fire, as well as clay. Clearly then the experience and skill of kiln workers were critical in controlling the kiln environment and locating various forms of porcelain to different parts inside the kiln, to prevent distortion and cracking of the finished product. In fact, in the production line for this vase, there were many other workers too, assigned to such procedures as trimming, polishing the body surface, cutting off the vase from the wheel, and water replenishing: each contributing to the perfect form in various ways. In the imperial workshop, each team member was focused on his own task, but their work interrelated with others to such an extent that even a tiny mistake from the biscuit-loading worker would spoil the form of the porcelain ware (Wang 2004: 108, 206-209). Hence workers were working towards a common goal – creating an anticipated effect with porcelain ware for the imperial court. The fact that the vase form embodies the technical virtuosity of the Qing dynasty, points to the collective actions of craftsmen in mastering the resistance of material. This suggests that the static, final artwork's perceptual qualities do not stand alone; rather, the artwork is infused with the artist's bodily action, a vigorous performance of technical process and a meticulous plan of production.

There is, then, a social and technical dimension to appreciating the formal qualities of an artwork. Considering its function of being displayed, an artwork is made to create an enchanting effect that reveals the process of creation it has gone through. This suggests that the perceptual qualities of an object are an extended agent of the artist, giving us hints of how

his/her body handled the material. To a certain extent, the art medium also shows an intention of its own, as its material resists the artist's deliberate act. This enables the artist to develop a certain skill and technique in exploring a wide range of aesthetic possibilities according to his/her role in a particular social context. In other words, an artwork is a performative mediator, showing the dynamic of its perceptual qualities as a materialised dialogue between artists and medium.

4.3.3 The object as cultural embodiment

In an attempt to look at art in a wider temporal context, I now turn to the communicative function of material culture.



Figure 4.4 Bamboo in Monochrome Ink, Wen Tong (1018-1079), Song Dynasty
Hanging scroll, 131.6 x 105.4 cm (© National Palace Museum, Taipei)

Throughout history, objects have actively 'organised' human culture in that they elicit sensuous interaction, such as visual impression and a manner of engaging in a particular activity, gradually consolidating as some form of cultural resource and eventually motivating the production of art. To explain how cultural resources evolve into art production, I use Wen Tong's work, *Bamboo in Monochrome Ink*, as an example (figure 4.4). Passionate about the aesthetic qualities of the subject matter, Wen Tong established a distinguished style of painting bamboo that applied contrasting ink shades and calligraphy techniques to rendering depth and rhythm for the bamboo leaves (Lin 2006: 184-186; Xue 2001: 78). Clearly, his own creativity was a prime-mover in the making of this inkwork. However, looking into the rich tradition of Chinese art we find that ink bamboo is one of the most important themes in scholars' painting, and that it is associated with a wide range of ideas or feeling – from the Confucian virtue of resilience through the moral integrity and intellectual strength to withstand adversity, to the aesthetic qualities of vigorous and gracefulness (Zhang 2001: 89-90). Wen's accomplishment did not lie in developing bamboo painting as a prototype for the genre, but in skilfully handling the ink and brush to create a new artistic language to communicate the grace and resilience of the Chinese scholar (Xu 1999: 230-232; Lai 1992). Hence, the painting can also be understood as an *agent* of the prototype, which if we look at it in socio-cultural context embodies both Wen's intention and the cultural significance of bamboo, and enabling us to unfold what the artist's choices were affected by during the process of creation.

Taking a historical perspective, artists, innovationists and preservationists alike engage in an artistic dialogue, deliberately or unintentionally, by relating their creation to an art tradition. Gell (1998: 158) further develops this argument by looking at art-producing traditions which emphasise stylistic coherence rather than artistic innovation, such as the Maori tattoo. In Gell's view, objects demonstrate a similar style within a particular period of time; they can thus be conceived of as an objectified consciousness of this group, or a tradition. This objectified consciousness is composed of memories of the past and continuously modified expectations related to the future (1998: 236). The particular set of objects is itself an internal network between the past, present and the future of a tradition. In other words they are part of a collective whole, extending the distributed personhood of a community in establishing a standard of excellence for artistic pursuit (Gell 1998: 221).

In terms of Chinese ceramics, this explains why court wares encouraged classicism, so that imperial production from the 18th century copied the design and decorations of the Ming dynasty and even inscribed the imperial reign marks of Chenghua (reigned 1465-87) from the previous period (Li 1996: 266-267). Classicism in Chinese decorative art might be considered as seeking creativity from ancient style and form for the interpretation of new material compositions and techniques. It prompts artists to pay tribute to an artistic tradition, and facilitates innovation that retains its integrity through not producing pleasing kitsch but exploring aesthetic sophistication (Yang 2000: 24-27). According to Lan Pu's historical account, the Qing imperial kiln develops special units of

craftsmen working on various renowned styles and forms from the past (Lan 1991: 3.83-94).



Figure 4.5 Three different interpretations of the form of Gu, the beaker vases:

(Left) Bronze beaker, Shang dynasty, 1100 BCE, 26cm H (© BCM);

(Middle) Glass beaker; Qing dyansty, c.1700-1800, 22cm H (© BCM);

(Right) Blue and White porcelain beaker, Qing dyansty, c.1700-1800, 37cm H (© MEAA)

By imitating an excellent style from a previous period, craftsmen would refine or redefine a traditional aesthetic formula for contemporary utility. For instance, *gu* was used as a wine beaker in rituals during the Shang dynasty (c. 1500-1028 BCE). In the late 17th century, literati connoisseurs found its archaic form elegant for potting flowers in the intellectual studio (Yuan 1994 [1568-1610]: 217). For craftsmen, it became fashionable practice to modify the form into a more decorative one and produce their own interpretations of *gu* in different materials or decorated with contemporary designs (figure 4.5). Traditional prototypes thus become cultural agents enabling contemporary potters to study the aesthetic

tradition of the arts and develop a continuous dialogue with the past. Exceeding the temporal span of human lives, the works materialised the Chinese intellectual concern with preserving traditional culture. They were 'leftover from the past', stimulating re-creation of classic pieces (Dong 1994 [1556-1637]: 453) and helping to establish aesthetic formulae to stimulate continuity of the arts.

Clearly, this art form conveys cultural significance and longevity. In addition, I argue that art objects, especially those decorated with a symbolic motif, can be studied as an embodiment of human thoughts, of communication. Gell (1998: 164-165, 24-26) opposes the idea of art functioning as a communicative system, because he considers this to be synonymous with a semiotic analysis of art that risks overlooking the materiality of the object and, therefore, ignoring the complexity of material culture. He suggests that there are many forms of representation, for instance written text, aniconic images of god and abstract patterns of plants, in which the art elements are representational according to graphical logic rather than as an arbitrary system of language. Stressing the differences between the visual elements of art and language structure, he argues that merely exploring symbolic meanings misconceives visual grammar, and removes us further from the object *per se*.

I agree with Gell that semiotic analysis has its defects; yet researchers should not neglect the fact that it is but one of the various approaches in understanding the dynamics of material culture. I argue an object is multidimensional, in the sense that its entangled relationship with the human world can be operated on two levels: presentational and

physical. Presentationally, an object is created by people in order to orientate themselves in the world through sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and emotional response. Its perceptual qualities enable people to employ diverse meanings and subtle differences in relation to the world (Miller 1987: 107; Tilley 2001: 260). For instance, Chinese people treasured jade as a precious stone for its hardness, smoothness, translucency, and subtle lustre. In the Neolithic period, these characteristics were interpreted as the symbol of immortality and thus jade pendants were often used in ritual ceremonies and in sets excavated from tombs, bridging the realms of life and death (Rawson 1996: 44; You 2002: 1-4). During the second century BCE, various qualities of jade were attributed to Confucian values, such as benevolence, righteousness and purity. Jade pendants prevalent among elites were known as 'ornaments of virtue', alluding to high social status, and the melodic clinks of the hanging parts were said to magnify intellectual composure while the wearers were walking in grace (Hayashi 1997:108-109).

This jade example indicates that objects can equally perform practical functions as well as create discursive significance. In terms of physical dimensions, an object's interweaving into people's lives takes an essential role in cultural transformation, mediating meanings across time and/or space. The object thus serves as a representation of human culture as far as it operates as a cognitive mechanism itself, grounded by recurrent and systematic rules through cultural experiences rather than sporadic impulse (Miller 1987: 109; Tilley 2001: 259-260). In the case of Chinese decorative art, it is likely that the production of certain objects is conditioned in a

particular cultural context, where the recipients project a set of beliefs onto a decorative motif or object (Rawson 2007: 102-103). Referring to a ceremonial robe of the Wanli emperor, Rawson shows that human need for warmth and covering one's body is the basic agent that abducts the production. However, auspicious symbols embroidered onto the ceremonial robe, such as an axe for judicial strength, and grain for the economic obligation of the state to feed the whole population, projects a set of political beliefs that enable the emperor to perform his role as the figurehead exercising state power. These decorative motifs thus institutionalise cultural resources in carrying political significance within a tradition (*ibid* 108-109). Hence the robe, embodying cultural expectations of the emperor, possesses a form of agency which actively organises the participants' experience in a ceremonial context.

Speaking from the object's perspective, Gell attempts to re-shape art theory by substituting the artist, art history or aesthetic qualities for the artwork itself. Seeing the art object as a captivating agent retains a presence of in-betweenness; this highlights the object's active role in shaping human experience through our bodily perception. On an individual level, I argue that objects serve as a tool in facilitating our bodily and embodied functions, and act as a 'security blanket' to us, projecting our feelings to handle it as if it were a person. What is important is that we, as social beings, interact with a world of things within a particular socio-cultural context and therefore enable the object to embody not only individual perception, but collective intentionality. This implies that material culture study is not merely an analysis of the 'material'; it is rather an

enquiry about the cultural practices of materiality in a collective sense. The examples of the production of imperial porcelain pieces and the Wanli emperor's robe illustrate that objects are cultural agents that project our expectations in communicating with each other over time. By extension, stressing the communicative nature of objects enables us to see a museum object as the material leftover of human experiences, speaking to us about how our ancestors changed the world with things; it projects our humanity beyond the limits of the present time.

4.4 Theorising the museum object

In this chapter, I started with a question: how could a museum enable visitors to see its collection as a living body? As the visitor studies from the last chapter show, static museum interpretation leads to a one-dimensional aesthetic viewing which tends to be visually dominated and detached. In positioning material culture within the context of bodily experiences, I have therefore appealed to perceptual phenomenology in order to theorise how objects are in the museum for us to identify with.

Emphasising the in-betweenness of objects, Merleau-Ponty suggests that an object can be defined as the material result of human experiences that replicate and shape human cultures, bodies and persons, both symbolically and materially. In other words, the object is not a 'dead body' of materials, but a living extension of human beings from different places and times. This notion argues that tactile communication between object and people is possible, if we are willing to turn to our bodily experiences with reflective faculty. It reminds museums to broaden the studies of

material culture from the formal qualities of an object to the sensory stimulations it embodied. In the light of this, Chinese material culture may be viewed as a communicative agency explaining how it is used, produced, and experienced within a particular socio-cultural context, that would bring enjoyment and inspirations to visitors. Encountering an object is beyond an intellectual exchange, it is a sensuous experience in feeling how its perceptual qualities coordinate with each other in unifying materiality and functionality into aesthetic sensibilities. Thus, material culture in a museum context can be more than a display of objects, it can be a dynamic object-human communication, which aims to mediate the past, present and future in relation to contemporary concerns.

Chapter 5

Making sense(s) of Chinese ceramics

5.1 Living with ceramics

In *Pendennis* (1959), William Thackeray offers a vivid observation of how an everyday object, namely a tea set, formed an intrinsic part of a woman's life during Victorian England:

'So Mrs Shandon went to the cupboard, and, in lieu of a dinner, made herself some tea. And in those varieties of plant of which we spoke anon, what a part of confidante has that poor tea-pot played ever since the kindly plant was introduced among us! What myriads of women have cried over it, to be sure! What sick-beds it has smoked by! What fevered lips have received refreshment from out of it! Nature meant very gently by women when she made that tea-plant; and with a little thought what a series of pictures and groups the fancy may conjure up and assemble round the tea-pot and cup!' (1959: 328)

By gently swishing the tea back and forth, feeling its fragrant breath, and taking a sip to fill her body with this refreshing sensation, Mrs Shandon felt released from her unhappy marriage. The cup of tea served as an agent of emotional comfort, and its materiality – the beverage and the utensil – shared the lady's tears, sickness and secrets. In the context of our daily life, the object-human relationship is operated through functionality and situationality; Mrs Shandon, occupied by her dismay, probably associated her tea set with the routine of preparing the beverage and the temporary

emotional relief she would enjoy, yet she may have felt rather detached from the beauty of its materiality and the way it conveyed the sensuous experiences of tea. While having her cup of tea, Mrs Shandon probably neglected how the tea whispered while flowing from tea pot to cup, or how the delicate curve of the mouth rim of the cup felt on her lips. It is as Merleau-Ponty (1962: 347) observes: by living with a world of things we tend to take these loyal but quiet things, such as ceramics, for granted. It is unlikely that we would feel the formal qualities of stoneware when we are having a bowl of warm porridge in the morning, or appreciate the throwing technique a craftsman had mastered when we see a pot containing a flower arrangement at a party.

Nonetheless, for reasons of historical and/or aesthetic significance, many of these pottery wares, especially Chinese ceramics, enter museums as a public cultural repository to be displayed for the world to see. Stripped of its daily life context, how should a display of Chinese objects be perceived? As stated in previous chapters, museums tend to treat Chinese objects as specimens that would either help to construct a typology of Chinese ceramic art, or promote an understanding of Chinese culture. Focusing on disciplinary research, the interpretation is informative, detached and technically-loaded, yet of little use in helping visitors to communicate with the collection in a tactile language. In addition, Chinese ceramics are hardly the most eye-catching objects in museums. According to my field studies at the BCM and MEAA museums, visitors tend to perceive ceramic wares as 'ordinary objects', which are 'lifeless', 'boring' and 'detached'. The collection only appeals to a coterie of visitors including

collectors, experts and art lovers. To visitors who have certain prior experiences with Chinese culture or pottery, ceramic wares offers them an aesthetic sensation that triggers the desire to own a similar piece; an 'authentic' vision showing something about China and/or a cross-reference associating with themselves. Looking at Chinese ceramics denotes a less than robust and reflective object-human relationship, based on personal interests and prior knowledge. My question is: how could the arena change visitors' perceptions and empower them to listen to the sensual tactile language of Chinese ceramics?

This chapter considers the practical implications of my proposed notion of object as human agency that could be communicated with, through a tactile mode of looking. Appealing to Merleau-Ponty and Alfred Gell, I define a museum object as a communicative agent provoking visitors to feel the sensuous experiences it shared with human beings at different times in the past. Museum objects are thus a living, object-human manifold embracing human experiences from the past and continuously generating new messages with contemporary society, including museum curators and visitors. To put it simply, in an exhibition context, an object is meaningless by itself. It is an incomplete, open and in flux manifold awaiting completion through the visitors' interaction with its materiality. In this chapter, I further explore this notion of museum material culture in the realm of exhibition interpretation, with specific examples from the Chinese ceramic collections at the BCM and MEAA.

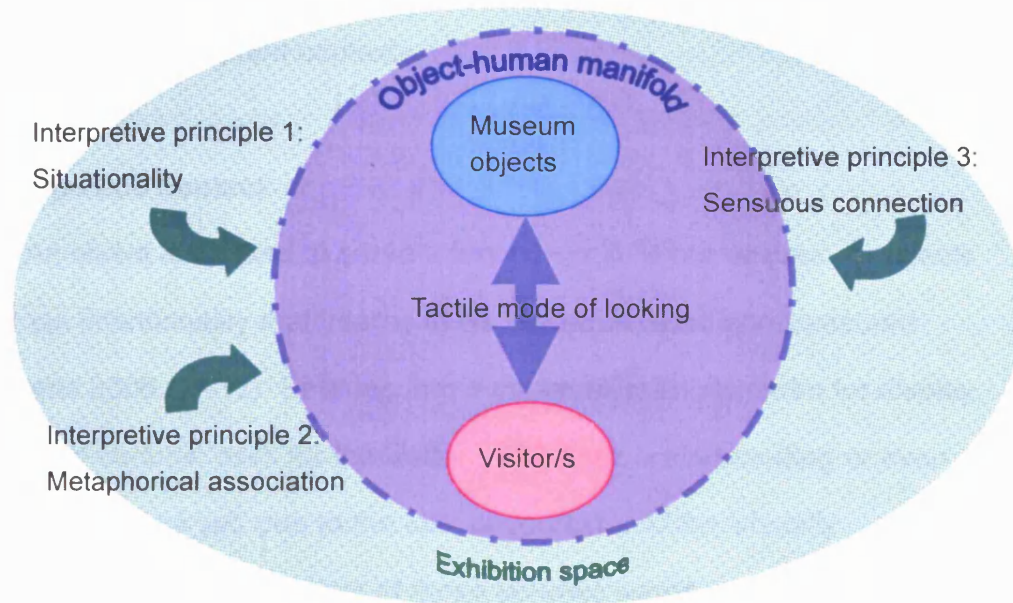


Figure 5.1 Relationship between objects, visitors and museum exhibition

Highlighting sensuous experiences as the core of the object-human relationship in an exhibition context, in this chapter I first introduce the notion of 'tactile mode', of looking to connect objects' perceptual qualities with visitors' bodily experiences, in developing an exhibition space into a sensuous zone of contact. Second, I examine three interpretive principles – situationality, metaphorical association and sensuous connection – which engage visitors to adopt this alternative mode of looking within the zone of contact (figure 5.1). I argue that sensuous experience of museum objects enables us to relate to a daily life object bodily and/or symbolically, demonstrating how we may experience the world differently. This is an aesthetic interpretation striving to be a sensual provocation that illuminates intrinsic qualities of objects and recognises various aspects of human experiences within a visitor's personal context. Appealing to empathic understanding, it is also a humanistic approach, seeing the world through the stimulations of our senses in order to connect

with others from different contexts.

5.2 Sensuous contact

An object is created to serve a function or fulfil our desires; it projects a human intentionality that yearns to be looked at, used and treasured (Edwards 2006: 11-12). Entering into a museum, a public realm for display, a Chinese ceramic asks for the visitor's attention, understanding or even appreciation. And yet, due to the lack of context and the 'visually unappealing' qualities of some of these ceramic wares, they are likely to be neglected in a visually-dominated display. And while museum interpretation such as text and illustrations provides related information on art history, cultural fashion or social practice, it constitutes a neat intellectualization that frames ceramic objects as specimens, put under expert examination in a strictly controlled laboratory to construct an order for understanding human culture. A ceramic work is thus no longer either a well-used utensil conveying a delicate sense of the art of living or a fanciful embodiment of an artist's passionate bodily action; instead, stripped of sensuous contact it is understood simply as an example of a genre, demonstrating certain aspects of a practice, a belief or a technique (Pearce 1992: 27-28). Considering the museum's role in offering fulfilling experiences for audiences, this detached interpretation suggests a rather inert object-human relationship that probably fails both parties. To reconnect with the object's tactile language, therefore, I argue that what the object asks for is that visitors adopt a tactile mode of looking which connects with their own sensibilities in understanding it as a sensuous object-human manifold. In the following discussion, I define the concept of

'tactile mode of looking' and justify how this viewing experience enhances meaningful object-human communication in an exhibition context.

5.2.1 Tactile mode of looking

The word 'tactile' is derived from the Latin *tactilis*, meaning tangible things that can be touched. A tactile mode of looking, therefore, embraces a sensuous vision that scrutinises the perceptual qualities of an object attentively, as if touching them and creating imaginative bodily experiences, such as enquiring how it interacts with people. It is an aesthetic approach of looking that concerns an object's perceptual quality *per se* and how these elements work with each other to produce an overall aesthetic effect. Underlining the rationale that materiality stands in its own right, such a viewing illuminates the qualities of the medium and offers viewers a captivating sensuous experience. It suggests that looking should not be an analytical examination, rather an imaginative experience to feel the interplay between each of the formal qualities; for instance, harmonic coordination between thick glaze and a sturdy stoneware body, or faint engraving on a thin porcelain body that highlights the translucency of the material. In addition, this mode of looking points to people's stories, which asks visitors not to judge but to empathise by drawing upon their personal experiences. Appealing to human experiences and emotions, it is nonetheless a creative act, which encourages visitors' personal interpretations of the object, inspired by the artist's unique perspective on the world. In other words, a tactile mode of looking suggests a manner, action or way of thinking that empowers material culture to be experienced aesthetically, emotionally and creatively.

This mode of looking by no means denies that the production of an artwork is operated according to specific socio-cultural criteria and technological development of artistic media; nor does it ignore the artist's intentions and the philosophical significance embedded in a piece of work (Crowther 2001: 114-115). As Merleau-Ponty (1962: 174) states, 'it is the sight of the pictures which provides me with the existing Cezanne, and therein the analysis finds their full meaning'. This implies that a tactile mode of looking is an intimate approach attempting to recover Cezanne's agency, including his passion, bodily action in creating the work, and his dialogue with the art world, embodied in the colours or brushstrokes of the painting. As we have seen, artwork is more than an artist's agency; rather it is a multi-layered embodiment of living experiences that includes personal preference, social practices and/or cultural significance. Nonetheless, it is through our bodies that we re-enact the aesthetic experiences which the artwork would have shared with its creators, users or connoisseurs and therefore make an effort to interweave diverse perspectives into our own socio-cultural context. In response to the sensuous manifold an artwork unfolds for us, a tactile mode of looking suggests that our bodily experience is the prime contact with an artwork in understanding these objects and their historicity.

Considering the notion of tactile looking in an exhibition context, such an object-human communication can evoke three levels of enjoyment: first, sensory interests that evoke aesthetic imaginations to explore the essence of materials; second, engaging dialogues with people from different times

and/or places; and third, intimate understanding of the world from diverse perspectives, such as artists or scientists. It argues that a museum experience with objects should conform to formal qualities – sensory embodiment of the object, as if getting in touch with other lives encapsulated by the materials.

5.2.2 Tactile looking in a museum

In considering the object-human relationship in a museum context, the notion of tactile looking is an attempt to broaden conventional museum experience by transforming a short, instinctive episode of meaning-making into an open, in-flux and multi-layered engagement with the materiality of objects. While looking at a museum object, we should 'listen' to the object's tactile language and rejoice at its intrinsic qualities, such as the celadon colour of the glaze or the abraded texture of the body. It is through the sensuous stimulations shared by the objects and its human agents that we can become involved in the world as others would have experienced it in the past. Looking, therefore, engages viewers in the blurred zone of in-betweenness, where formal qualities of objects can be fully experienced and consequently enable subjective associations, such as desire, emotions or memories, to emerge from the human stories embodied by the objects. Such an object-human communication is an intersensorial experience as well as a bodily engagement and an act of aesthetic imagination, insofar as what is seen is physically, cognitively and emotively related by the viewer to the sounds, touch, smell, taste and feelings that may be evoked by an object. Combined with the phenomenological approach to looking as reciprocal, this implies that a museum exhibition

can serve as more than a spectacular display of nice things; it can be a sensuous contact zone that extends our friendship to objects and brings lives from different times and spaces into meaningful dialogues with our own.

Given the rather inert object-human communication I observed in the BCM and MEAA, it may seem unlikely that visitors would take up this alternative way of looking. However, I suggest that, regardless of the depth of these object-human interactions, the diverse interpretive strategies visitors employed to place and understand an object within their personal contexts, demonstrated that the process of tactile looking is not completely alien to visitors' existing meaning-making processes. According to my observations, for example, visitors tend to refer to museum text in making sense of Chinese material culture – and yet their actual responses and interpretations seldom match the intellectualized museum interpretation's connection of objects to identification and historical information. Like the sensory experiences advocated by my notion of tactile looking, visitors tend to connect with distinctive formal qualities of objects – such as expressive form, bright colours or delicate decoration – and to make meaning personally, aesthetically and/or culturally. In the conventional interpretive settings I observed, however, the extent to which visitors were able to 'listen' to what an object had to say for itself, was limited – either by lack of guidance in how to listen (so that visitors' own subjective perceptions ranged too widely) or because the intimidating conventions of intellectualized museum interpretation inhibited multi-layered and sensuous responses to objects. Visitors generally lack the confidence to

tune into the tactile language of objects through their bodies, and therefore their personal meanings fail to progress from one-dimensional encounters to a deep-seated engagement with materiality.

It is my contention that appropriate museum interpretation can facilitate a more vigorous object-human communication, by promoting a tactile mode of looking in order to empower objects to tell their stories through their formal qualities – and in turn this can encourage visitors to experience these embodiments affectionately. That is, it is possible for museum text to draw upon personal experiences, creativity and body memories, in order to show visitors how to approach an object and the sensory experiences it shared with people in the past. Museum text, can, in other words, potentially and gradually turn object-human communication into an intimate, reflective and sensuous process. Visitors can be considered as co-creators of museum interpretations, encouraged to be open to feeling, listening and imagining, in exploring multiple meanings through their communication with an object that is a living embodiment of people from diverse contexts.

A comparison of two different texts on red monochromes will demonstrate the communicative implications of conventional museum interpretation and my alternate proposal. The BCM text focuses on the technical development of red monochromes, stating:

'Underglaze red, derived from reduced copper oxide, was first used by the Chin [Jin] (1127-1235) and later Chun [Jun] wares potters (see

Case J) ...The glaze is difficult to control, and is often found to have run over the foot and ground down. Such pieces are generally attributed to the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Their bold and simple design and the unpredictability of their glaze are features shared with the mediaeval stonewares' (figure 5.2).

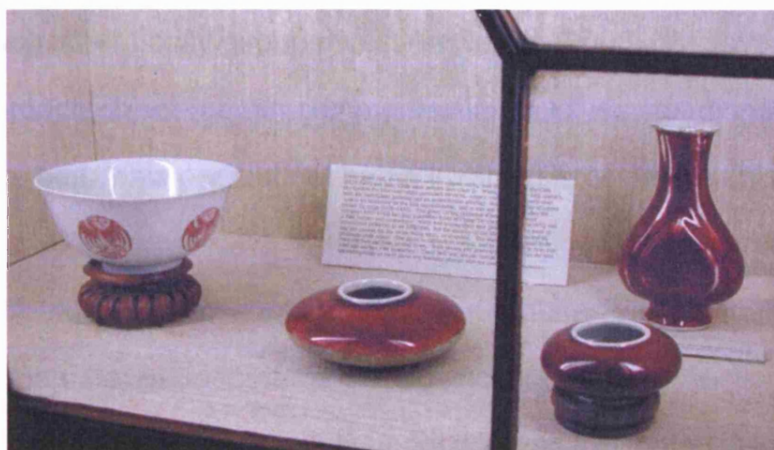


Figure 5.2 Red monochromes displayed at the BCM
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)

Informing visitors of the technical difficulties of making red glaze and of features which enable identification of the technique, the museum text retains an authoritative, textbook interpretation of art history, and conceives of the object as a specimen to be carefully examined. It suggests that visitors should identify the characteristics of the red glaze and its design, but does not highlight the aesthetic effects, such as the green mottling effect crushed against the brilliant glaze, or how the glaze running over the ceramic body shows different textures. Instead of suggesting where or how to look at the work and hence decipher why it is made in specific ways, it locates the object within a disciplinary framework that constructs values, such as historical significance or technical

accomplishment, and tames the sensuous experiences it brings to visitors (Classen and Howes 2006: 200). What this museum label lacks is sensuous stimulations and a feeling for how these perceptual qualities coordinate with each other, which would enable visitors to explore the maker's intentions and artistic tradition. The label's static interpretation implies that reading text is the key to approaching objects – to the extent of suppressing other bodily experiences. As Serota (2000: 55) says, in such an approach object-human communication involves standing in front of a conveyor belt of history, but not being involved in its present historicity.

The intellectualised museum interpretation requires visitors to refer object to text in order to understand the significance of the collection. This implies that the viewing experience is understood as the materialisation of textbook reading and the object as a tactile illustration of the text. But unlike browsing through a museum display, book-reading allows the reader to take the initiative in looking for the information which is available to him/her through flicking pages. The experience focuses on constructing text into a form of hyper-realistic relationship between narrated object and human, within one's intellectual context (Pearce 2007: 37; Baudrillard 1983: 166). In the exhibition context, however, the object-human relationship is fragile and unstable, in that it may easily be interrupted by the visitors' agenda, visiting experiences and reception. While meandering through display cases, museum visitors are 'caught up' in choosing their routes according to their personal agenda, social dynamics within the group they may be in, and exhibition design (Kaplan 1999: 51-52; MacDonald 2002; Falk and Dierking 2000: 7-8). Dominated by sight and

movement, the museum mode of object-human relationships is interrupted by the tension between the participatory nature of the museum visit and the static interpretive text – which tends to be literal, rational and somehow irrelevant to daily life experiences. In other words, the dynamic of the museum visit renders the object-human relationship spontaneous and personal, in contrast to the intellectual discourse proposed by conventional museum interpretation.

Rather than looking at objects with detachment, a tactile mode of looking emphasises sensuous experience over knowledge construction, attempting to connect objects and visitors through bodies. In light of this, a suggested interpretive text promoting tactile looking reads:

‘Red glaze is difficult to produce, especially if it is made of copper oxide, one of the volatile ingredients that easily discolours under high-temperature firing. Even to the court artists, the end pieces were surprises created by the spontaneous reaction between kiln atmosphere and chemical ingredients.

Imagine you were one of those artists, what would you notice when the works revealed themselves after the firing?

Would you be excited by the red coloured washes mixed unpredictably in a cloud of green haze? Would you like the movement of the glaze and the way it highlights the curves of the vessels and the subtle

variations of colours? What else would you notice?' ¹

My visitor studies in the BCM and MEAA demonstrated that many visitors feel overwhelmed by the cold hard facts of firing techniques and the chemical recipes involved in making pottery. The proposed interpretation avoids technical terms and employs metaphors in presenting the information creatively. The text does not seek to be authoritative, but a friendly voice inviting visitors to relate to the monochromes from the perspective of an imperial artist, and so develop their own personal interpretation. My visitor studies demonstrated that most people tend to respond to bright colours, but are less likely to relate to vessel form and texture. Therefore, the text uses the glaze colour as a point of entry and then encourages visitors to feel the movement of glaze and the curves of the form, in order to appreciate the coordination between form, colour and texture. After offering a few hints on how to associate with the intrinsic qualities of ceramics, the text ends with an open question encouraging visitors to continue the dialogue.

The proposed text argues that implementing the notion of tactile looking in museum interpretation can be a creative means of connecting visitors and objects sensuously. I hold that framing museum interpretation within the nexus of tactility is inspiring in three ways. First, it is a means of empowerment, partnering objects and visitors to explore the diverse forms

¹ I recognise that this example and other proposed interpretive text shown in this chapter are too long for an exhibition label. As researchers suggest, museum text should be concise and not communicate too many ideas in considering its readability (Serrell 1996: 31-33; Coxall 2000: 199; Ravelli 2006: 66-68). The proposed texts are written to explore the potentials of the proposed interpretation approach, in showcasing how objects can be interpreted creatively.

and meanings of materiality in an exhibition context. On the one hand, museum interpretation focusing on the sensory experiences embodied by an object empowers the object to find its voice and share its stories with a wide range of audiences. It confirms that the object is not a mute, unapproachable being, but a lively human agent eager to connect with others across time and space. I argue that such a body-oriented interpretation also empowers visitors to centre object-human communication upon their personal experiences, encouraging visitors to bring personal stories or poetic associations into exhibitions in a way that infuses museum visits with dynamics and creativity. At the same time, object-human communication is expanded from intellectual discourse to multi-layered meanings, including sensory stimulations and aesthetic experiences.

Framing museum interpretation within the nexus of tactility is also inspiring because it reinforces my argument that it is our bodily and personal experiences which connect us with materiality and others' experiences, thus fostering an empathetic understanding of the past and hopefully offering an insight into our own place in the world. Using the tactile mode of looking urges museum interpretation to take issues, thoughts and concerns from contemporary society and, depending upon what experiences are embodied by the collection, to touch people in relation to materiality in a contemporary context. Highlighting how an object could be empowered to connect with people, the museum could then consider an appropriate means of communication, such as a text panel or education worksheet, and transform the desired experiences into

presentable material for exhibitions. Finally, in finding the connection between objects and subjects, the tactile mode of looking and its use of personal feelings and experiences as its connection to material culture, suggests that museum interpretation is not a neutral medium, but an agent embodying the interpretive team's taste, preferences and perhaps some sort of negotiations with other stakeholders, such as community groups; that is, the tactile mode of looking emphasises a shift from detached browsing to aesthetic appreciation and/or reflection, nurturing a more intimate object-human relationship. Hence, by integrating personal histories and bodily experiences into institutional narration, museum interpretation is enriched in its exploration of diverse approaches of how to relate to materiality – and so works to promote a better understanding of the world.

In short, the notion of tactile looking urges a return to materiality in bringing to the surface the sensuous feelings objects would have embodied, and indicates that the museum should convey this through any media it presents to the public, including text panels, illustrations, hands-on activities, leaflets, architecture design, learning programmes, tours and on-line publications. It indicates that interpretation is a synthesising process merging object into subjectivity and subject into materiality, which provokes a holistic experience that rejects compartmentalised knowledge and simplistic presentations of a linear progression of time. It aims at broadening museum experiences by starting as an aesthetic appreciation of objects and expanding to embrace a wide range of human experiences according to the exhibition theme and museum vision.

5.3 Object experiences

By positioning Chinese ceramics within the nexus of tactile consideration, my proposed notion of interpretation perceives of these objects as agents, which shape human culture with their materiality. Like people, ceramic objects should not be viewed as an illustrative text in art history or sight-dominated discourse. They are akin to individual beings experiencing sensory stimulations, emotions and desires with people. In examining how to highlight this for visitors, I have devised three rules: situationality, metaphorical association and tactile design, in order to detail the practical implications of my tactile mode of looking.

Considering the object as a human agent, the interpretive principle of 'situationality' examines the bodily actions and emotions an object shares with its owner.



Figure 5.3 Black tea ware with bird motif, Southern Song dynasty, late 12th century, 10.5cm D (© MEAA)

At first glance, the notion of situationality has much in common with a conventional museum interpretive approach in looking at function and related socio-cultural practice in a particular cultural context. Though it does follow this line of enquiry, it emphasises a return to the sensations of how an object would feel and/or be felt when it is used, rather than the socio-cultural context to which it relates. To illustrate how this notion of situationality suggests a different mode of looking, I use the black tea ware from the 12th century as an example (figure 5.3). In the MEAA, a text panel introduces black tea bowls as a specific genre and details distinctive characteristics of different production centres across the country. Alongside this, another panel illustrates how these objects would be used by outlining the evolution of tea drinking throughout Chinese history. To help visitors associate the collection with its cultural context, the text states:

‘During the Song dynasty whipped white tea became the preferred drink, and the black ware bowls were thought to be the best way of setting off the white froth. In the Northern Song period, tea from the Beiyuan gardens, spring water from Huishan and tea bowls from Jian became known as the “three excellencies” (*sanjue*) in court circles.’

Relating the black bowl to its production kiln, with whipped white tea and court fashion, the MEAA provides visitors with informative facts to understand the historical significance of the collection. Interestingly, the narration, by referring the tea bowls to one of the ‘three excellencies’, seems to urge the visitors to admire its aesthetic value. However, as the visitors will probably be unfamiliar with the cultural context of the black

ware, how will they agree with the Chinese upper class of 800 years ago and appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the objects? What is lacking here is a tactile interpretation that engages the visitors' imagination to a bodily experience that one would share with the object. I argue that by highlighting an object's specific touch with people, the museum interpretation would appeal to personal experiences from a wider perspective and enable visitors to understand sympathetically the collection as an object-human manifold. Instead of explaining what it is, it would invite visitors to figure out how it could be experienced. Using a situational interpretation, museum text on black tea ware could be written like this:

'During the 12th century, Chinese people thought that drinking whipped green tea in a black bowl would enhance the appreciation of the light colour of the tea. Imagine holding the tea bowl with both of your hands, its thick stone clay body gradually conducting the warmth of the tea to you. Take a sip: with the refreshing aroma and slightly bitter taste lingering, you find that the earthy texture of the bowl, rendering the black glaze tint, sparkles in contrast to the creamy coloured tea. Slowly you finish the tea, a shadowy image of yellowish strokes is revealed. In the dark universe of the bowl, the bird motif seems to show that everything is complete: aeons are but a moment and beauty is always within grasp. Have you found beauty in it?'

Appealing to the daily life experience of having a hot beverage, this interpretive text returns to the object itself and invites visitors to explore the

perceptual qualities of the stoneware including its thick and rough biscuit body, earthy texture and painted decoration; and the sensuous experiences of having tea with it. Going through the process of drinking tea with visitors, the text tries to create the leisurely way in which traditional connoisseurs enjoy conveying the spiritual implications of tea culture (Liao 1996: 34-35, 78-79). It is through projecting the bodily action or experiences in which an object would be involved, that the proposed interpretation portrays a specific situation, framing an object-human relationship in the more familiar context of our everyday experiences. This suggests that a black bowl with a simple design is not merely a drinking utensil extending one's bodily function, but a crucial performative agent that transforms tea drinking into a multi-sensory aesthetic, which also embodies a philosophical inspiration deep-rooted within the intellectual tradition. Therefore, sensory stimulations would be a medium, which draws black tea ware and the Chinese art of tea-drinking to visitors' experiences, and communicates spatial and temporal differences.

Instead of constructing a typology of ceramic art or a chronological order of its related cultural practices, situational interpretation suggests that a museum should not only conduct conventional disciplinary research, but also initiate research into the sensuous aspects of material culture in developing new exhibition themes. From the collection's point of view, this tactile interpretation poses new questions such as what bodily and emotional responses a ceramic ware would demand from its creators, users and connoisseurs; how these multi-sensory experiences would be perceived within a particular cultural context; and how the perceptual

qualities of a ceramic piece would be modified due to various trajectories through their social biography.

Returning to the object *per se*, this proposed strategy aims to research various scenarios an object will have encountered, in order to explore the multiple stories it embodies. Intellectually, ceramic works are the embodiment of the craftsmen's skills and creativity, social practice, and cultural value, which offer a three-dimensional perspective on understanding a culture. For example, porcelain ritual vessels including incense burners, beakers and lidded jars, would be used to discuss the tactile experiences of participating in an ancestor worship ceremony, an important aspect of family life in traditional China. This would give us a glimpse into how Chinese people perceived of their relationship to the family and their heritage, which bears upon contemporary family issues.

On the other hand, in bearing witness to human history, ceramics would be marked by ages or a historical event, suggesting a 'direct sensory experience' of the past in embracing personal history and memories that would supplement conventional narration of macro-history (Prown 1982: 2; Kavanagh 1990: 11-12). For instance, Su Shi (1037-1101), the renowned writer of his age, is said to have used his porcelain pillow as a Qin, or zither, pretending to entertain himself with some 'music' when he was banished to Hainan Island (Kong 1998: 39. 1345). The pillow would later have reminded Su of the period of exile in which he was deprived of friends, economic means and intellectual leisure activities, such as attending concerts or literature forums. Sweeping his fingers across the

pillow, Su thus infused the object with his memory of musical performances and his optimism in trying to amuse himself in an extremely austere situation (Feng, Huang and Zhu 2001: 43. 2224-2225, 2227-2228, 50.2453). Here, the notion of situationality can also be a return to individuality in recovering people's personal experiences that remind us that like us they were people who lived on this earth, regardless of whether they were major historical characters or common folk. Through materiality, emotional accounts and conflicting personal discourses surface and show us dynamic versions of history.

By locating bodily experiences as the core of object-human relationships, this notion of situationality suggests that inter-disciplinary research will give rise to new ideas on the juxtaposition of objects that could bring different collections, such as natural history and decorative art items or objects from different spatio-temporal contexts, together in understanding our world. For instance, the Plymouth City Museum launched a ceramic display in parallel with natural history and human objects in order to explain how the Martin brothers, the renowned British potters, drew inspiration from nature and Japanese designs of natural scenery, in response to the call of Art and Crafts Movement to turn away from the depersonalised and monotonous age of the machine. On the other hand, the Craft Council displayed the ceramic works of Bernard Leach alongside Chinese, Japanese and Korean ceramics, works showing how ceramic ideas travel across cultures and times.

Perhaps these examples seem rather art-oriented, appealing to art

historians or art lovers. In fact, since ceramics can be considered as an art that unifies function and form, ceramic materiality will compress diverse human experiences and permit the devising of interpretative themes within social, cultural or spiritual contexts (Li 2004: 220; Su and Li 2000: 237-238). Eating, for example, would be such an interpretive theme: table ware made of various materials from different cultures could be displayed in order to examine how different forms of eating utensils shape our table manners and diet preferences. Hence, museums could consider Chinese ceramic collections as a communicative agent mediating diverse sensuous experiences with people and other types of objects, in bridging our understanding of the past and hopefully reflecting on our condition of being.

In many respects, my notion of situationality is hardly groundbreaking. Museums have long used this strategy to empower visitors to experience the past. Most notably, shop-front models, display backdrops, and architectural fittings are some of the three-dimensional exhibition designs used to position objects within a particular scenario. For example, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts reinstalled a 17th century scholar's library and study from Suzhou in order to illustrate an 'authentic' setting for their Chinese collection (2005). To a certain extent, this is a reconstruction of the past in which visitors would meander around the environment and have a tactile sense of what the past would look like. However, I remain sceptical as to whether this 'authentic reconstruction' would foster a sensuous dialogue with a Chinese ceramic collection, for two reasons.

First, contextualising artefacts within a 'realistic' scene can be

considered akin to a photographic work in freezing the past to a specific context. It is a still-life presentation creating an 'authentic atmosphere' of the past, as curators and experts suggest, convincing visitors to believe what would have happened through looking (Pearce 1992: 207-208). By appealing to a three-dimensional installation, it can be noted that it is less likely to emphasise the bodily experiences or emotional responses of how one would feel living in the spatio-temporal complex concerned. Therefore, instead of offering a tactile understanding of the past, it provides a first-hand visual experience conveying a false sense of realism. Second, situational display transforms the whole setting into a complexity of objects, a spectacular view, which draws visitors' attention and encourages them to admire its realistic aesthetics. Showing various objects placed according to their function and/or owner's sensibilities makes it obvious to visitors how these objects would be used. However, this is rather distracting in the sense that visitors would browse through it as an integral sum and acknowledge certain objects with which they would associate. What a photographic setting cannot inform visitors is where to look and how an object-human manifold would be experienced (Shank and Tilley 1996: 77). Ironically, the more details the installation presented, the more spectacularly the effect would be magnified but the less visitors would communicate with each component in a setting. To summarise, historical reconstruction neither focuses on materiality *per se*, nor encourages a tactile understanding of the past. Drawing its power from authenticity, it creates an awesome visual experience that overlooks the individuality of an object.



Figure 5.4 Pottery figure of a singer (?), Eastern Han dynasty (25-220CE), 42cm H (© MEAA)

In comparison to a realistic setting, my proposed notion of situationality does not lie in reconstruction, but in suggestiveness that highlights the bodily experiences and emotional responses in which an object would be involved. It implies that the object not only occupies a spatial presence, but is an animated being which has interacted with people. Thus, it does not promise a view on the past, but aims to suggest experiences one might encounter, in order to promote a more sympathetic and reflective understanding of culture through objects. A visually uninteresting figure from the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220) is a useful example (figure 5.4). Chinese funerary pottery includes daily life objects, animals and figures, and forms a distinctive genre of ceramics because people believed that the deceased should be treated as if they were alive in order to pay respect to them (Pu 1993: 219-222). To equip visitors to

look at or associate with these objects, I propose contextualising what bodily experiences they would be expected to perform in suggesting a potential emotional bond with the dead. According to this, a situational text would be written as:

‘This figure is most probably a singer made to serve the master of the tomb. She is wearing a winged hat and a long, loose robe; one of her hands rests on her cheek in a contemplative pose. The figure would have originally been painted to depict her expression and the details of her clothes, but the coloured pigments have faded away over time. Looking at the sculpture, how would you describe the expression on her face, melancholy or comforting? What might she be contemplating, the ephemeral existence of this world or the mystery of the afterlife? What would she sing for the people laid to rest?’

Obviously, a figure like this would neither sing, nor contemplate, as the text states. Nonetheless, these bodily actions are what the figure would be expected to perform in entertaining the dead (Xiao *et al.* 2000: 121-122). This suggests that the burial figure can be considered as a performative mediator embodying one’s emotional bond with the dead. Appealing to common life experiences, the text explains the rationale of having these burial figures and urges visitors to explore the universal theme of death and mourning from a different cultural perspective. Although it does not describe or illustrate the burial site, it aims to be suggestive in guiding visitors where to look and in eliciting their imagination to complete what is absent in that particular situation. By posing questions about how the

figure would feel and what she would sing, the text invites visitors to look for tactile clues from the object and draw from their life experiences in working out their own answers. In comparison to a situational display that relocates visitors into a pseudo-historical environment, this plain and simple text can be viewed as a participatory spark that engages visitors in an object-human communication and decides how the object could be felt. While a situational setting enables visitors to view the past, my proposed notion invites visitors to be an equal partner in making sense of materiality. In other words, it offers an imagined situation for visitors to look, experience and ponder upon an object and the human issues it captured.

Given the central role of materiality in shaping human culture, the notion of situationality attempts to place an object in its own context by considering the bodily actions, experiences and emotions it would share with people. On the one hand, it is a performative means highlighting bodily experiences that frame an object as an animated temporal presence, rather than a static spatial being. On the other hand, it serves as a creative spark, provoking the visitor's interaction with an object through looking and sensuous imagination. Situationality, then, which draws on the daily life experiences people would have shared with objects, facilitates the exhibition as a contact zone for a personal and reflective object-human dialogue and bridges the intellectual and physical gap between material culture from the past and the contemporary audience.

5.4 Creative metaphors

Taking the sensuous experiences we share with things for granted, our daily encounter with ceramics is functional rather than aesthetic, in that we tend to use it absent-mindedly and are less likely to appreciate its formalistic beauty. The challenge of promoting the tactile mode of looking lies, therefore, in considering how an aesthetic sense of 'novelty' could be evoked when the visitors look at the ceramics, especially those plain monochromes. I suggest that metaphorical association, another principle operating within the mechanism of tactile looking, would encourage visitors to look at 'boring' ceramics with fresh eyes.

In unifying materiality and creative association, Christopher Tilley's notion (1999: 6-8) of 'object as metaphor' is useful in encouraging an absorbing aesthetic experience. Informed by cognitive science, he suggests that we are living within a complicated network of objects, events and texts, and our interpretation of the world is obtained through translating an unknown into something familiar and tracing this relationship to others. Tilley argues:

'Cognition is essentially a process of seeing something as something and this is the core of metaphorical understanding. Seeing something as something is grounded in culturally mediated bodily experiences' (*ibid* 34-35).

At first glance, Tilley seems to be suggesting that our interpretation of the world is constituted by a process of mapping in which objects are read in a

way analogous to text. This would be rooted in Levi-Strauss's structuralism, which argues that language and material culture can be structured in revealing underlying patterns of cultures. To a certain extent, Tilley does not deny that objects carry symbolic meanings in communicating abstract concepts to the human world. However, note that he positions 'bodily experiences' at the core of the object-human relationship, which implies metaphorical understanding is not merely a mental construction, but an ambiguous and multidimensional interpretation synthesising objects, action and events (*ibid* 8, 34). This suggests the object signifies cultural values structured on a macro-cultural level only through its first-hand interaction with people. Metaphor is therefore a blurring boundary, cross-referencing with the materiality of the object and the bodily experiences of people in understanding our world.

Unlike language systems, in which meanings are assigned by grammatical rules and arbitrary definitions of words, the object-human relationship is far less stable and structured so that meanings are generated by visual representations, emotional projection, and/or tactile association within a network of objects, people and situations. Ignoring the fact that it is a cultural practice or abstract concept which an object signifies, Tilley suggests that metaphorical mapping is not merely an imitation of reality nor a reflection of pure thoughts, but a sensuous experience, which embraces philosophical insight, emotional impulse and carnal desire. In this sense, the object is a communicative agent in conveying tactile experiences, such as the emotional response of a life event, the aesthetic pleasure of form and shape and bodily memory of

production process within its socio-cultural context.

Extending Tilley's notion to an appreciation of Chinese ceramics, I argue that metaphor is a critical interpretive strategy that equips visitors with the means to associate familiar concepts or experiences with the translating of the 'lifelessness' of the collection into a dynamic and stimulating object-human manifold. That is bringing together two ideas in a meaningful union to relate material culture from different spatial and/or temporal contexts to contemporary cultural life that is familiar to visitors' personal histories (Golding 2005: 53). Focusing on our bodies, I suggest that metaphorical association encourages visitors to look at the collection from three perspectives – symbolic, aesthetic and technical – synthesising personal feelings, creativity and craftsmanship.

5.4.1 Symbolic experience

Considering the object as a metaphor, it is obvious that this operates on a symbolic dimension referring its visual qualities to cultural values embedded within its context. Throughout the passage of time, Chinese decorative art has been packed with symbols articulated according to an observation of the natural world, religious stories and legends, philosophical allegory, and literary creations. According to my field studies at the BCM and the MEAA, visitors are keen to learn more about Chinese symbolism. As an example, the crane is a representation of longevity and a lotus motif refers to purity. Visitors find it fascinating that pictorial representation encodes another layer of meaning and that this seems to be one of the keys to understanding the art as well as the culture. Due to

visitors' interest, Chinese symbolism is one of most popular interpretive themes in exhibiting the collection. Museum interpretation is inclined to consider the textual meaning of decorative motif, defining it as a static 'container' of ideas. For example, looking at a peony motif carved onto a wine jar (figure 5.5), the BCM text reads:

'The peony is known in Chinese as the King (or Queen) of Flowers. It is a symbol of good fortune, riches and feminine beauty'.



Figure 5.5 Wine jar with carved decoration of peony and an illustration of the flower (left)
Wine jar with sculpted decoration and polychrome enamels,
Ming dynasty, 16th century, 46.4cm H
(Photo and illustration by Ting W Y V, 4 October 2007)

Written in a concise manner, the text explains various meanings in which the decorative motif would be embedded. Although the visitors would be interested in having information like this, I find it simplifies the mapping process of peony decoration and its signified notions and confuses how

the motif would embrace wealth and beauty in the same context. Tracing it back to its context, the King of Flowers was named because its showy flowers and variety of bright colours had embellished the imperial gardens with grace during the 7th century and were therefore associated with nobility and luxury (Li 1999: 213-214; Pan 2001: 158-159). Its feminine beauty comes from Li Bai's poem, which describes the beauty of the Concubine Yang as being complementary to the blossoming peony: 'The glamour of colored clouds gleams in her raiment, And a flower's ravishing beauty radiates from her face' (Sun 1982: 152-153). Ignoring the sensuous experiences a peony would elicit in different contexts, the museum interpretation seems to be losing touch with the human world that transforms the decorative motif into a standardised representation of vague concepts. Moreover, looking at the decoration more closely, the peony decoration is a subordinate part of the major theme – the Eight Immortals and other Taoist deities. It corresponds to the lotus petals decoration at the bottom, and is also carved in a rather stylised manner. It is possible that the floral motif would serve as a delicate embellishment, as it becomes too prevalent a standardised form for decoration in a craftsmen's resources bank, which does not necessarily carry any symbolic meanings. In this sense, the text overlooks the sensations of the motif and the imagination that it triggers, and oversimplifies the complicated and unstable process of applying symbols in decorative art.

I argue that the key to understand Chinese symbolism lies in identifying the human agent, such as the artists' creativity and people's life experiences in shaping the metaphor. It should explore how materiality can

help us understand what urges craftsmen to create, or people to own, such a piece. An object is a metaphor relating human experiences to cultural resources in its context, informing us about a culture. In order to consider further this symbolic relationship between objects and its cultural context, I use a blue and white dish showing the fish-dragon story to illustrate the sensuous experiences it embodies (figure 5.6). The decoration depicts the legend that a carp will transform into a dragon if it successfully leaps up the Dragon Gateway, a stretch of rapid currents on the Yellow River (Liu 2006: 2a). It was a popular symbol referring to success in the highly competitive civil service examinations in the Qing dynasty (Tao 2003: 8).



**Figure 5.6 Blue and white plate with fish-dragon motif,
Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign (1662-1722), 48cm D
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)**

To look at the symbol tactilely, I propose this interpretive text:

‘This fearsome dragon is basking in his triumph amid the tumbling rapids. Do you notice that it was once a small carp swirling and twirling, fighting against the merciless hydraulic of the upstream current? It is only after endless struggles that it successfully leaps above the powerful walls of thunderous water and so is transformed into a dragon. This legend encourages many Chinese people to remain persistent when they are stuck by trying challenges that seem to devour their existence. Perhaps the owner of this plate, a scholar from the 17th century, would share his story of achieving success through the hell of the civil service examination. How have you won over adversity?’

Given that the visitors would probably focus on the depiction of the dragon, the proposed interpretation draws their attention to the decoration motif as a whole by retracing the bodily actions of this transformation process: following the flow of the water, being pulled by the rapids and rising from the upstream current. Much attention is paid to describing the water, referring the intense rhythm of the curves to the turbulent flow and suggesting the transformation experience tactilely. To bridge the temporal differences between the object and contemporary society, it does not only relate the fish-dragon motif to the symbol of achieving success in its own specific cultural context, but also refers it to the wider perspective of encountering difficulties. This suggests that the symbolic meaning of this decoration does not emerge out of the legend, but it is the strong desire for accomplishment embedded in the legend that constitutes the

association. Although I do not explicitly identify the fish-dragon as a decorative symbol, this is justified as the text suggests symbols should be understood in a more subtle and 'human' approach that returns to the perceptual qualities of objects and to our condition of being. Thus the object can be considered as an emotional agent embodying common human experiences that enrich its materiality with symbolic meaning. Museum interpretation could employ symbolic metaphor sentimentally in eliciting the visitors' emotional and sensual responses to a ceramic collection.

5.4.2 Aesthetic association

In addition to legend and its emotional connection, I suggest that a metaphorical understanding of an object would also enhance our appreciation of its perceptual qualities in triggering aesthetic imagination. As mentioned, our daily interaction with ceramics tends to be functional in that it is less likely to explore the beauty of material. In associating sensuous enjoyment and creative imagination with some seemingly uninteresting qualities of objects, I argue that aesthetic association is, in fact, a means of adopting the artist's or connoisseur's perspective to look at ceramics in a new light. This sounds similar to the conventional art-historical interpretation that relates the provenance of the object to a particular genre, technique or style. But this is not the case. The major difference is that the art-historical approach aims to construct a typology of the arts through identification and production information, while my proposed interpretation attempts to demonstrate how various elements of a ceramic work can instigate insightful reflection about our world. The

former would be defined as an intellectual analysis emphasising historical significance; the latter advocates an aesthetic experience in making sensuous pleasure, conveyed by a ceramic work, its priority. Hence, by applying aesthetic metaphor in order to map materiality with sensuous enjoyment, museum interpretation could empower visitors to seek beauty from the most common things.

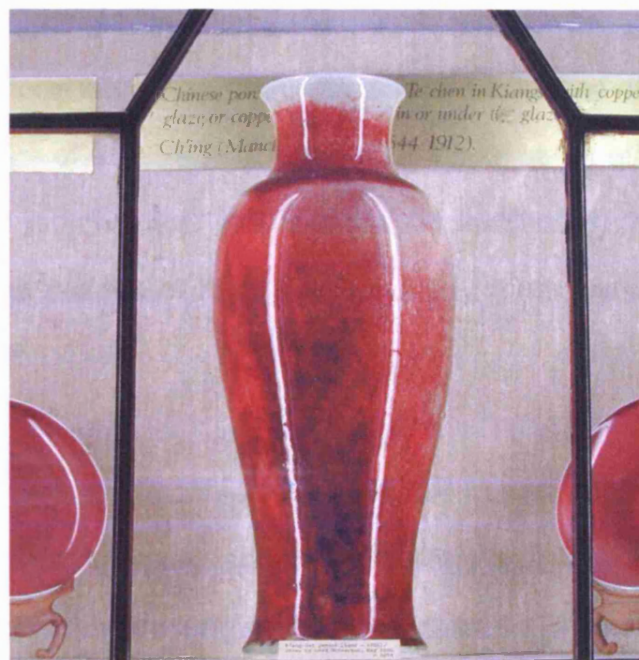


Figure 5.7 Red vase in the form of meiping, Qing dynasty, Yongzheng reign (1723-1735), 34cm H
(By Ting W Y V, 14 September 2006)

In recovering our tactile sense of novelty embedded in ceramics, I suggest museum interpretation should return to the object itself and further associate its qualities with imaginative description. This is a creative means that would encourage visitors to look at an object from a sensuous perspective, in fostering their dialogues with a piece of work. For example, due to their lack of skill and interest, visitors are less likely to explore the

intrinsic value of plain monochromes from the Qing imperial workshop. To promote aesthetic appreciation, creative metaphors would be used to highlight the beauty of the objects in a sensuous approach. I suggest that an interpretive text for a monochrome vase (figure 5.7) could be written thus:

'In Chinese, this form is known as '*meiping*', the plum vase, which refers to the graceful curves of the plum blossom tree. Look carefully at how the form works together with different splashes of red. I can see an image of a noble lady doing a slow spin in her glittering dress. How would you describe her? Is she a drunken beauty flushed with the excitement of the night or a graceful lady in her joyous posture of royal ease?'

Adopting a connoisseur's perspective, this text invites visitors to look at the elegant curve of *meiping*, and the contesting splashes of straw yellow and ripening red running along the form. Inspired by Chinese connoisseur literature, aesthetic metaphors are drawn to associate various images of ladies with the form and colour of the vase. Interestingly, in Chinese as well as in English, different parts of the vase would be analogous to the human body. In the case of *meiping*, Chinese connoisseurs would see it as a lady who has a short narrow neck, broad shoulders and a comparatively slender body with an elegant curve towards its base (Xu 1994 [1925]: 243-244; Lu 2000: 96). Apart from the form, Chinese connoisseurs try to capture the essence of the glaze – its lustre, redness and subtle tonal variations by referring to the glaze colour with many names, such as

'drunken beauty', 'watery crimson' and 'peach blossom flakes' (Liu 1994 [1925]: 878-879; Zhao 1973: 93). Working with the metaphor of vase as a lady, more details, such as the identity of the person, her posture and temperament, are created to encourage a tactile viewing of the object and further eliciting imaginative association with the materiality.

First, the metaphor of a dancing lady aims to implement a sense of motion to highlight the contrast between the plump vase body and its out-turning base; whereas the glamorous outfit is another layer of metaphor portraying a delicate touch of yellow spots puffing out from its red background, which encourages visitors to look at this interesting glaze effect. Next, the metaphor of drunken beauty, directly drawn from the connoisseur literature, is a contemporary interpretation linking the vase to a boisterous party, dressing-up and dizziness from intoxication to convey tactilely the hazy and lustrous effect of the red glaze. In contrast to motion and sensuous setting, the third metaphor depicts the vase as a noble lady in a rather relaxed and yet aloof posture. It associates the red glaze with nobility, and the stout body and its broader shoulder with refined composure, which suggests another perspective in considering the character of the vase according to its size, form and glazing effect. These rather liberal interpretations show that aesthetic experience is multi-layered, in flux and personal, encouraging visitors to explore the multiple sensuous pleasures of the object and gradually develop their own metaphors. To invite the visitors' involvement, the text explicitly states that the metaphor of the dancing girl is made by 'me', the writer, and poses questions asking visitors how they would portray the vase as a 'her'. It is

possible that visitors might disagree with these interpretive metaphors. Nonetheless, these are the hooks that heighten the visitors' senses in feeling various qualities of objects from different perspectives. Hence, operating in an aesthetic dimension, imaginative metaphors translate perceptual qualities of ceramics into sensuous enjoyment and life experiences in a contemporary context. Instead of understanding art history or technical development, it encourages visitors to experience the sensations a ceramic piece evokes. Through poetic images inspired by Chinese connoisseurship and common human experiences, aesthetic metaphor returns to explore the nature of materiality and hopefully shape the object-human relationship into an open, creative and tactile museum experience.

5.4.3 Technical reference

In applying aesthetic metaphor to materiality, I translate qualities embodied by techniques and skills involved in the making of ceramics to sensuous attribution, such as a stout vase body and glaze lustre, which contributes greatly to the novelty of the art. In some ways, it seems to eschew craftsmanship, the bodily interactions between a team of artists and the medium in producing the ceramic works the team envisioned. Nonetheless, this is a deliberate attempt to frame an object-human relationship within the visitor's personal context, rather than a grand narration of art history. As previous visitor studies at the BCM and the MEAA suggest, though museums tend to offer technical information constructing the technical development of Chinese ceramics, visitors are less interested in learning the complicated production procedures and

wide ranges of chemical recipes for clay and glaze. My questions are: how would understanding the technical production of ceramic art encourage visitors to look at an object *per se*; how would the notion of metaphor help objects overcome the technical barrier and speak to visitors in more dynamic ways?

In considering how a museum is to accommodate the visitor's needs, I use the MEAA's interpretation of ceramic technicality as an example to examine the obstacles that visitors would encounter in this respect. Aiming to promote Eastern art and culture, the MEAA interpretation provides detailed information to mediate its art-historian approach with visitors' interests and prior knowledge. Its introductory panel outlines various types of Chinese ceramics, the materials and techniques involved in the making and its manufacturing system. To explain the basic chemical reaction of the medium, it details various clays, such as loess, sedimentary clay, porcelain stone, and chemical ingredients; for example, lime alkali, acid rock and silica in the production process and defines three major types of ceramics. For instance, it states:

'Stoneware is harder than earthenware, but it also varies in colour and texture. Unlike earthenware, in the firing it becomes impermeable and will hold liquid unglazed. Stoneware is fired at temperatures between 1200-1300°C. '

The panel text is undoubtedly an informative and precise account of defining ceramic ware. To visitors with limited interest and prior knowledge,

it seems that including much detail makes it difficult to contextualise its significance in its own historical context. For instance, the firing temperature implies a sophisticated construction of kiln design in controlling the kiln atmosphere and constant temperature, whilst using chemical ingredients in creating ceramic ware with various textures and colours is a discovery in the history of science (Bai 2002: 242). What is lacking is that the text does not show the visitors how these technical issues relate to the collection and therefore does not equip them to apply the information in fostering their communication with objects. Moreover, the text places much emphasis on the production process and the manufacture system, but not on the technicians' bodily experiences, nor their creativity. The passive voice is used to outline the production procedures, such as 'the clay is removed from the ground', and 'the piece is decorated and fired to the required temperature'. This, in parallel with its concern with the kiln site management and workforce organisation, subtly implies that ceramic production would be understood as a grand production mechanism in which medium and craftsmen work together as requested. To a certain extent, it is as many visitors describe, 'lifeless' in that is disconnected from human experiences: how these technical advancements extend our bodily agency in shaping our table manners or sensibilities of interior decoration; and how the process encapsulates collaborative bodily experiences of craftsmen. Again, this may help visitors to understand the overarching intellectual scheme of ceramic art, but risks turning away from the object *per se*.

It seems that visitors feel disconnected from the details of chemical

mechanisms of the medium, technical process and/or manufacturing system. As my visitor studies at the BCM and the MEAA suggest, very few visitors, except potters, ceramic students, or art lovers, would recall specialist's terms and techniques mentioned in the museum text. To arouse visitors' interest in technicality, another dimension of ceramic appreciation, I argue that applying metaphor, the bodily association, to consider technicality, would enable visitors to connect with not only the techniques and skills as such, but the bodily experiences of craftsmen through their sensory perceptions. By highlighting bodily experiences, metaphorical interpretation would give visitors some tactile clues about how an object or medium would have felt during the production process and that would illustrate why the finished work would be made in a particular manner. In other words, it draws the difficult theme of technicality within the visitors' sensory framework, and identifies ceramic ware as the embodiment of collaborative human efforts in its making. Striving to take a 'warmer' approach, it also proposes a chemical mechanism of the medium, such as a formula for enhancing the plasticity of the clay or reduction firing, to be understood not from a detached scientific point of view, but from a craftsman's perspective. This suggests that the permeable nature of metaphor would add a human touch to the technical process in considering what the bodily experiences of craftsmen would be in working with the clay and why they choose a particular chemical recipe to decorate the vessel. Instead of asking how the ceramic is made, it considers how traditional Chinese craftsmen produce a piece of ceramic work. That is, to consider technical production as a tactile conversation between craftsmen and medium in moulding the craftsmen's bodily experiences as well as the

medium into a desirable piece.

To show the capacity of metaphorical interpretation, I have written a panel text on the making of Chinese ceramic as an example:

'Chinese ceramics: a dance between nature and humanity'

Pottery is a dance between craftsmen and the earth, with a history of more than 5000 years; with graceful hand movements – kneading, pressing, or pinching – craftsmen take the lead. However, the quiet clay is no agile follower. It either slips from the maker's guidance, flops aside, or absorbs the bodily warmth of the person quickly and crackles. Gradually, the craftsmen will discern the slightest bodily gestures of the clay, and choreograph their moves to mould his/her partner into a desirable posture. Then it is time to invite another partner, fire, to the dance and solidify the clay at a temperature of 650-800°C, giving birth to earthenware, a coarse and porous vessel.

Later, craftsmen became more demanding of their partner and started sieving impurities from the clay. Stoneware, a finer and partially vitreous material fired at 800-1100°C, results in embracing a demure, natural beauty.

It was not until the 6th century that Chinese craftsmen discovered china clay, the finest and purest member of the clay family. This cake-mixture-like material requires craftsmen to be a firm but gentle lead performing a fast-paced dance with dash and dignity. Then it is through the breath of fire at 1320°C, transforming the performance

into translucence porcelain ware that is pure looking, like a gift from the sky, rather than the earth.

These elegant dances with clay also involve many other performers. To add a colourful touch to ceramic ware, painters would propose dancing with brushes and various colouring agents on the fired ceramic body. It is like dancing on a ball where every movement is well-balanced and delicate. Afterwards, the fire takes the last dance granting the vessel an exquisite form of immortality.

By looking at the display, would you be able to tell who is involved in the dance and how each party makes their move?' (Huanan Gongxueyuan *et al* 1981: 154, 166-169)

Locating the bodily experiences of craftsmen at the core of understanding technicality, I use dancing as a metaphor to show how it would feel working with the medium. I am aware that the technical procedures of pottery making are unique in that visitors who are not familiar with the art would find it difficult to associate with the process. The metaphor of partner dancing is used because whether or not the visitors are interested in the activity, they are more likely to experience it through their own participation or the observed performances of others – and thus understand that dancing is an art involving bodily communication. Looking at the production process tactilely, the interpretive text suggests that in the dance of pottery, it is the craftsmen acting as the leader while the clay would be the willful follower who 'performs' contrary to the lead of the craftsmen.

This highlights the difficulties the craftsmen will have encountered, such as the clay body flopping or crackling, and the solutions they devised, including developing bodily skills and exploring different clay components (Zhu 2004: 89-90). It is an attempt to invite visitors to share the craftsmen's point of view in understanding the technical process as real life experience, not text-book information. In line with this, the text also refers the momentum of moulding porcelain ware to executing a fast-paced dance with a sloppy partner; and painting on a ceramic body to balancing oneself on a ball. It is through bodily experiences that the metaphors offer the visitors sensuous points of entry, to appreciate techniques and skills involved in the making, and to fill in the intellectual gap of how the object was made. Tracing back the process of making, during which the museum objects came into being, this notion of metaphor also implements motions and movements into materiality and suggests another dimension of looking tactilely. Instead of detailing technical information, I propose that sensuous imagination based on bodily experiences of the production process is critical in associating cold facts with visitors' experiences in order to facilitate the appreciation of craftsmanship. Neither a technical manual, nor an art history text, metaphorical interpretation of technicality is a means of conveying the experiences shared by craftsmen and the ceramic medium during the making.

I propose, then, that metaphorical association is another rule invigorating a tactile mode of looking to connect visitors' sensuous experiences with various values embedded within materiality. Appealing to

Tilley's notion of metaphor, I consider the permeable nature of how a metaphorical mapping empowers visitors to suspend the objecthood of ceramics and associate its formal qualities with three different dimensions: symbolic, aesthetic and technical. Metaphorical mapping is thus used to explore human agents; for instance, scholars from the seventeenth century, connoisseurs, and craftsmen, expressing emotions, poetic imaginations and/or bodily actions, embodied by objects. By enquiring how and why an object was made in particular fashion, I hold that metaphorical interpretation is an accessible approach bridging the technical difficulties of historical fact and production information, so that visitors might explore the multi-layered experiences an object will have encountered.

5.5 Multi-sensory designs

Thus far, I have argued that interpretive principles of situationality and metaphor will associate the visitors' life experiences and sensuous imaginations with materiality through a tactile mode of looking. However, these suggestive means of connection may be too vague to disrupt a visually oriented visit in a sense-regulated environment, where visitors are required to follow a set of etiquettes including 'no touching', 'be quiet' and 'keep a certain distance from the artwork'. According to Merleau-Ponty, 'an object speaks directly to all the senses' (1962: 264). Our brain is akin to a complex computation system of which multi-sensory signals are received and analysed spontaneously according to our stored knowledge, in making corresponding decisions and action (Ramachandran 2003:35-36). Every bodily perception, such as sound and colour, spontaneously overwhelms us in communicating a complete expression of what we are encountering.

It is reasonable to suppose that installing tangible clues, such as auditory and tactile devices, into an exhibition will promote inter-sensory communication with objects. Hence, I propose inter-sensory clues as the third interpretive principle that will empower visitors to be more attentive to the tactile language of ceramics.

5.5.1 Feeling the touch

There is more to Chinese ceramics than meets the eye. According to the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, ‘everything that relates to the beauty of form and of the body is the domain of touch, not of sight, a superficial sense which can only render surfaces and colours of objects’ (cited in Classen 2005: 279). This is confirmed by Xu Zhiheng, the scholar collector from the early 19th century, who states:

‘There are various approaches to examine a piece of work: put your hand on the surface to feel its lustrous glaze; knock on the biscuit body to listen to its clarion note; and scrutinise the piece as a whole to study its colour...’ (1994:177).

Despite looking at colours, Xu suggests that touching expands aesthetic pleasure by feeling the glazed texture instead of merely looking at its lustre, and appreciating the quality of porcelain body with the aid of hearing. As Herder and Xu suggest, touching offers many clues, such as form and shape, texture of glaze and biscuit body, in fully experiencing a ceramic work. Through our eyes we would, of course, browse over these perceptual qualities at a distance, but little we would realise how our sight

will have deceived us. For instance, a Jun stoneware decorated with a thick milky glaze may seem rough and clumsy (figure 5.8). Yet holding it to our hands, we bring the bowl close enough to appreciate the interesting contrast between its smooth and slightly undulated glaze and the sturdy and stony biscuit body. This suggests that touching complements looking in a way that takes our sensory reception beyond skin depth and consequently enables us to connect with the object with greater sensitivity.

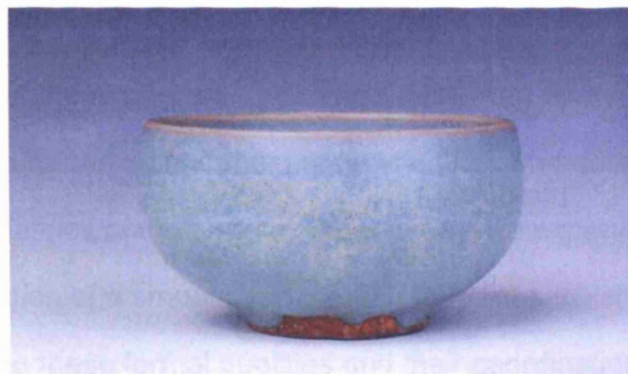


Figure 5.8 Jun bowl decorated with thick milky glaze,
Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), 8 cm H (© MEAA)

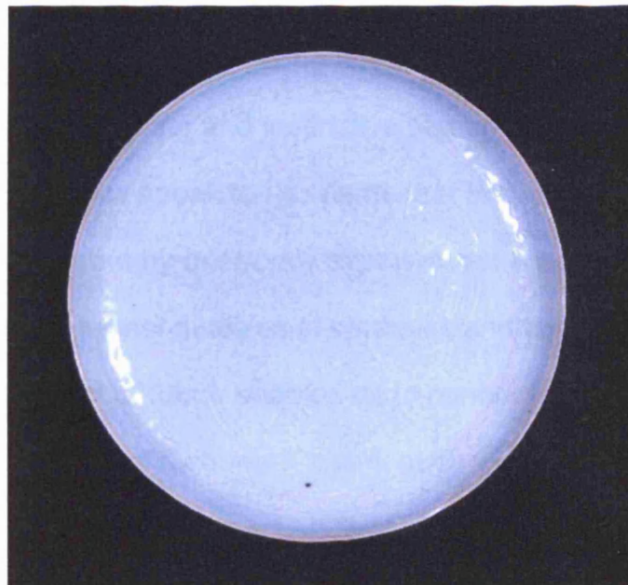


Figure 5.9 White plate incised with phoenixes and camellia,
Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), 20cm D (©MEAA)

Even though our eyes may offer a relatively 'faithful' depiction of a ceramic piece, our visual reception would not do it justice. Using a white plate incised with phoenixes among camellia as an example, we would take notice of its thin white glaze and subtle decoration through looking (figure 5.9). However, how does this thinness relate to the aesthetic of this object? How would we understand the subtlety conveyed by the decoration? It is not until our fingers caress the decoration that we would admire how the glaze is thinly poured over the incision rendering a delicate touch of the exuberant decoration. Following every incised line, we would feel a harmonic union of rhythmic curves and delicate cuts magnifying dynamics of the pattern. What this tactile experience reveals to us is the sensation of a smooth surface and fluid lines which guide us, further exploring these formal qualities and their coordination with each other (Xu 1994: 171, 200-201). This is a blurred zone of object and subject in which we enable these art elements to shape our perception, and spontaneously project our own feeling about this encounter. In this sense, touching creates an intimate and instinctive object-human communication through which ceramics speak to us, via neither technical information nor intellectual analysis, but by our bodily experiences. It is a genuine connection with the formal qualities of ceramics and our own bodily senses. In fact, an act of touch enables us to connect with materiality, and also retraces the touch of its human agent, such as connoisseurs or craftsmen, to some extent re-enacting their movement, experience in object-human interactions from various contexts. Again, running our fingers over the decoration of the white plate mentioned above, its flowing lines would embody the act of moving a carving knife to scratch, lift or

suspend using the agility of the wrist. It is through this bodily movement that touching reconnects us with the craftsman, so gaining a tactile understanding of the mastery of carving skills. In anchoring our bodily senses on the object, touching is a powerful means of enabling us to explore the tactile language of ceramics, such as form and shape, texture, weight, temperature and carved decoration, to be absorbed into materiality instead of intellectual analysis.

It is understandable that due to conservation and security concerns, touching is considered taboo in museum exhibitions. However, in developing a museum to be a sensuous zone of contact, I suggest that a touching device, instead of a museum collection, could be implemented, so encouraging visitors to adopt a tactile mode of looking at the exhibition as a whole. In accordance with the exhibition display and interpretive themes, three different types of materials would be considered as an essential part of the exhibition in fostering a tactile object-human communication. First, an identical copy of the original piece would be a communicative agent enabling visitors to explore the collection more fully. Facilitated by interpretive text suggesting to the visitors what to take notice of, they can hold the piece in their hands to experience the sensations evoked by its formal qualities and thereby not mistake it by sight.

For instance, a Dehua vase with lion-head masks (figure 5.10) may be visually uninteresting, but visitors would find its tactile language versatile with an interpretive text like this:

‘Dehua vases were renowned for their delicate craftsmanship.

Imagine you were a traditional scholar/collector and put this museum copy on your lap. Slowly caress its body. How would you describe the drama of its delicate neck and trimmed footing in contrast with the sturdy body? Can you discern the subtle flow of glaze running from the rim of the mouth and forming thicker drops to reveal details of the decorations? What is the feeling this piece tries to share with you?

(Chen 2005: 4-7; Chen 1994 [1910]: I.42a)



**Figure 5.10 Dehua vase with lion-head masks,
Ming dynasty, c. 17th century, 27.9cm H (©MEAA)**

To emphasise the tactile sensations evoked by this rather plain design, the interpretive text suggests to the visitors that they should consider coordination of different body parts and subtle differences of glaze.

Through open-ended questions, it invites the visitors to reflect on the sensations and make their aesthetic statements thoughtfully by connecting with the formal qualities of the vase. In addition to this, a copy could be put

in the black box for tactile contact, with visitors having to find the identical piece from the display. The aim of this activity is to sharpen the visitors' sensuous experiences to every tactile clue a piece may offer and consequently enable visitors to appreciate the beauty of a common thing. Second, a sample of clay and glaze, a copy of unfinished pieces, and a modern reconstruction of potter's tools, are tangible clues offering visitors a glimpse of craftsmanship. Although these objects are hardly exciting by any means, they would enable visitors to have an idea of how the displayed collection came into being, and why it is shaped in a specific manner.

As my visitor studies show, because of lack of context, visitors are less likely to appreciate qualities such as symmetrical form or refined body texture embodied by technical advancement. The materials suggested here would locate the collection in its own technical context by embodying technicality, craftsmen's creativity and the efforts involved in the process of making. Third, the tactile display focusing on one specific quality of an object would be another device engaging the visitors' act of touching. For instance, a tactile picture of ceramic decoration would accentuate various characters of lines, engraved or painted alike, composing the decoration. Moreover, a fragment of a ceramic piece would enable the visitors to feel the textures of its clay body and glaze. And a three-dimensional puzzle of objects would be a means of looking at form and shape through reconstruction. Instead of showing the visitors how to interact with a particular work, these props aim to help visitors familiarise themselves with various tactile expressions of ceramic language and develop a sensuous

means of communication so that they can adopt a tactile mode of looking at an exhibition. By deconstructing ceramics into different art elements, these props would facilitate visitors to rediscover the novelty embedded in these seemingly common qualities of ceramic wares. In other words, it acts as a tangible clue connecting not only with objects, but also with the visitors' bodily experiences, in recognising any subtle sensuous stimulation within one's world of things.

5.5.2 Looking by ear

As mentioned previously, installing tangible clues into a ceramic display is a participatory device, engaging the visitors to return to materiality. Leaving aside touching, I suggest that listening would be another absorbing means of connecting visitors with an object *per se*. It is concerned with ceramics being a medium that is itself odourless and tasteless, which makes it a reliable material for food storage. Although it would carry the smells or taste of the residues it had contained, after a long period of time, these sensations would distract people from the content of its function, rather than focusing on its materiality. To enhance creative association with ceramic art, I argue that relating music to ceramic appreciation would add another layer of aesthetic sensations to an exploration of the intrinsic values of materiality. In the following discussion, I first outline the rationale of associating music with the aesthetic values of ceramics; and second, explain practical tactics to apply audio devices in an exhibition context.

I admit that there is no obvious link between music and an

appreciation of Chinese ceramics. One of the most tenuous links is that traditional Chinese connoisseurs knock on ceramic bodies for a melodic tone in examining whether the porcelain clay is perfectly matured after the high temperature firing. However, this audio aid is far from aesthetic; rather it is technical, treating sound as an index of the degree of maturation of biscuit body (Zhao 1973: 88). Apart from this, there are traditional percussion instruments such as chimes (*qing*) and wind instruments including ocarina (*xun*) made of porcelain for its sweet tone (Chen 1994: II. 44b). Clearly, this means of music relates to expression and content of the arts, rather than associating with pottery as an art medium. I argue that music is a crucial means of conveying the aesthetic of ceramic art because the very nature of the art form would engage visitors to experience ceramics with another layer of sensations.

To musicians, philosophers and academics, including Stravinsky, Hegel and Frith, music is the most abstract form of art connecting one tone after another in different paces into a pleasant melody unifying with our bodies (Stravinsky 1947: 24; Kaminsky 1962: 125; Storr 1992: 172; Frith 1996: 109). According to the German philosopher Schopenhauer, one of the significant music theorists:

‘Therefore music is by no means like the other arts, namely a copy of the ideas, but a copy of the will itself, the objectivity of which are the ideas. For this reason, the effect of music is so very much more powerful and penetrating than is that of the other arts, for these others speak only of the shadow, but music of the essence’ (cited in Storr

1992:140).

Schopenhauer argues that the materiality of music offers few identical references to our phenomenon world tactilely or symbolically. Interestingly, it is the intangible materiality which emancipates a musical piece from phenomena details and inspires listeners to associate it with the inner significance of the human experiences that the composer renders.

Speaking within the context of Chinese and western classical music, a piece of musical work could be composed to depict a natural scene, narrate a historic event or convey emotional expression related to daily life experiences, and yet its intrinsic qualities, such as compositional structure or instrumental timbre would bear very little resemblance to the sounds produced from the related phenomena (Scruton 1999: 125-129). For instance, in his Sixth Symphony, Beethoven uses flute, oboe and clarinet to represent birdsongs from nightingale, quail and cuckoo respectively.

Melting into a symphonic flow, these birdcalls are an artistic platform transforming listeners from reality to the musical structure of an imaginary countryside. They are sonic associations bringing the sensations of lives to embellish the monotonous melodic theme of a flowing brook (Cooper 2000: 176-177; Lockwood 2003: 227-228). In the case of 'the Great Ambuscade', the *pipa* solo piece of traditional Chinese music, the musician uses dramatic harmonic progression, frenetic rhythm and spectacular finger techniques including pizzicato, roll, and slaps, to emulate the noises of drums, horns and soldiers' cries from the Chu-Han contention (206-202 BCE). The progress of the music does not re-present specific details of the wars, but invokes the moods of heroism and despair amongst the troops

portrayed in the epic (Yao 1999: 89; Li 1983: 73-80). These two examples suggest that unlike other forms of art, music does not convey descriptive content or emotional expression through artistic manipulation or distortion of the perceptual qualities of phenomena. Instead it is an intangible form of metaphor conveying an imaginative ambience in provoking the liveliness of birds flip-flopping around or offering immediate access to reflect upon the tragic warfare between the Chu and Han camps. The ambiguity of musical work lifts listeners from their daily life context to explore the artists' inner expressions. That is, listeners are absorbed into the flow of music in feeling its inner values, not in order to understand a specific dimension of human experiences *per se*, but to be in touch with the sensations, emotions or intellectual thoughts related to such an experience as articulated by the artist.

In addition to the transcendental quality that 'transports' listeners from daily life to a creative zone of aesthetic appreciation, the power of music also lies in its temporality that defines the process of listening as an intimate and engaging experience. Cognitive scientists suggest that in making sense of a piece of musical work, we have to memorise each of the separate tones and link them together into a continuous melody (Zuckermandl 1956: 15). When we listen to a musical performance, the music is not akin to an opening window inviting the viewer to seek information about the artist's world; rather, the audio experience is analogous to riding on a horse at free rein, so that the music would feed into our perceptions at its own pace and endow the listener with intrinsic meaning. In other words, listening to music implies that listeners are taking

part in its materiality in that they surrender their ordinary perceptions for audio sensations and enable meanings to emerge according to personal experiences. That is, the acousmatic character of the music experience engages us into a special, secluded realm in which external stimuli are blocked and we are allowed to explore the aesthetic imaginations articulated by the musicians (Sloboda 2000: 227; Scruton 1999: 221).

Indeed, composers are well-aware of the temporality of music that unfolds its melody in fostering listeners' anticipation. Studies show that composers are experts in heightening the expectations of the auditory cortex and providing meaningful and relevant resolutions by planning how their work should be structured evocatively (Meyer 2001: 334-347; McNeill 1995: 6). For instance, Henry Mancini's 'The Pink Panther' uses melodic contour, harmonic progression and rhythmic pattern as musical resolutions, to drive listeners' anticipation (figure 5.11). The melody begins as pairs of notes with pauses between to outline the basic pattern. In the second bar, the composer confirms the trend by delivering the harmony in similar keys and more pairing notes with rising contour. The pairings, however, then arise abruptly at double rate, which accentuates the flow and enhances anticipation through musical tensions between the expected and the uncertainties. Climax comes in the third bar when a long-held note freezes the melody and with a series of strong beats veering towards dissonance. Interestingly, Mancini then brings in an echo of the first three bars, which seems to reassure listeners about the basic flow of the melody to again build up their expectations – until the sixth bar, when the last beat violates the expectation that the melody will rise to a much higher pitch and

swerves on a long, accentuated dissonance. In this phrase, the flow ends the accelerating pattern that intensifies listeners' anticipation. By alternating between jarring restraint and sudden overreaching, Mancini creates constant surprises that propel listeners to uncover the dynamics of the musical flow (Jourdain 1997: 252-254). The tension between accentuating pattern and freezing note, and contrasting melodic contours, also instills a sense of funniness or a feeling of stealth that provokes more imaginative associates. To summarise, music as a form of temporal art is engaging, in that it offers an explorative experience in which listeners are surprised by its build-ups and violations and are drawn to apprehend the underlying pattern that conveys an emotional colour.

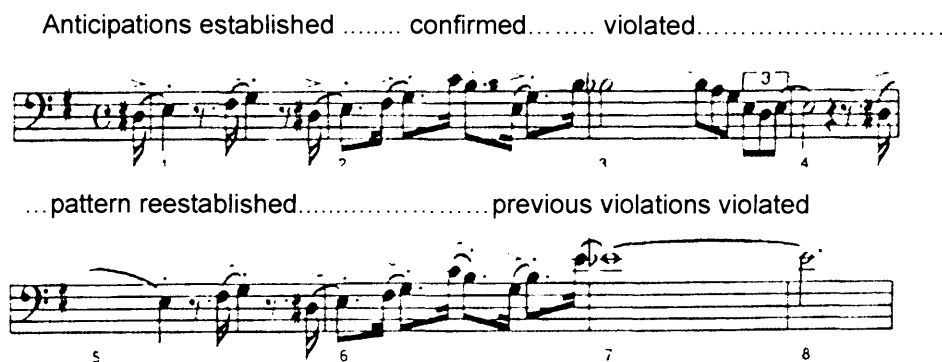


Figure 5.11 Listener anticipation in 'The Pink Panther' (after Jourdain 1997: 253)

In view of the directness and engaging power of music, I argue that integrating music into ceramic exhibitions would bring another layer of sensory stimulations that would invite visitors to explore the inner values of ceramic wares through different forms of aesthetic imagination. As my fieldwork shows, visitors are likely to fall into the limitations of daily life experiences and consider ceramics as functional objects that are ordinary

and boring. What eludes them is that by being honest to the medium, artists are liberated from phenomena and explore the infinite possibilities of playing harmonically with functionality and materiality. By adding auditory sensations into ceramic appreciation, visitors could be engaged into a realm of aesthetic imagination in which ceramics cease to be a mundane utensil, and become a meditative means of opening up to the inner values of materiality. Besides, looking at ceramics alongside music can also be considered as an evocative experience that would draw visitors to explore the emotional theme of both forms of art and, instead of looking statically, develop a feel for the human agents that a piece of work would have embodied.

This may sound overwhelmingly aesthetic in further withdrawing ceramic appreciation from visitors' daily life experiences. However, visitors – according to their interpretive strategies at the BCM and MEAA – tend to make aesthetic statements to personalise their dialogue with ceramic collections. Interestingly, their vocabulary is limited such that aesthetic statements would probably fall into three categories, namely, beauty, simplicity and delicacy. It is even more problematic that there are diverse perceptions about these categories and somehow they are interchanged to the extent that they mean very little in the understanding of the nature of its materiality. In fostering a more dynamic object-human relationship, I suggest that using musical clips alongside creative text would empower the visitors' aesthetic repertoires, enabling them to look at ceramic tactilely. It should be stressed that in some ways, inner values of materiality are difficult, if not impossible, to translate into words. Therefore,

interpreting these values with music is not a representation of ideas but rather a communicative means, which encourages visitors to join an aesthetic dialogue in recreating their own interpretation.

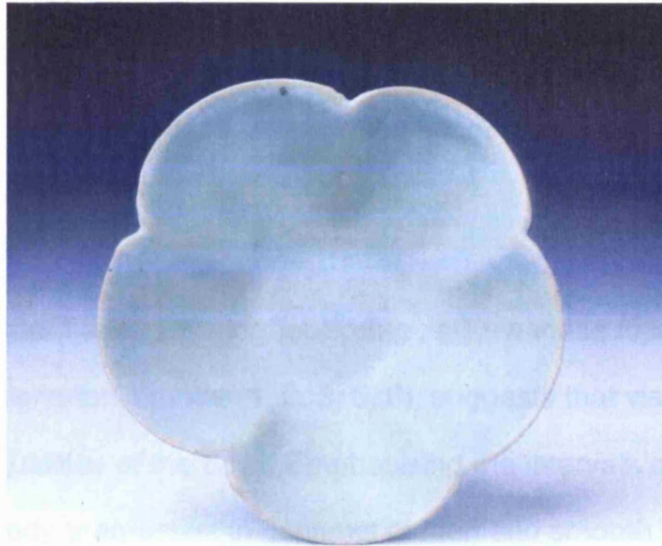


Figure 5.12 Yaozhou celadon five-lobed bowl, Northern Song dynasty, c. 12th century, 12.2 cm D (© MEAA)

Here is an example of a simplistic Yaozhou bowl, for which musical clips extracted from Grieg's 'Morning Mood', 'Peer Gynt Suite No.1' and the Xiao (Chinese bamboo flute) solo piece, 'Looking for Spring' (Wang chunfeng), are used to explore its intrinsic values respectively. These two pieces, though coming from different cultures, feature simple structure, gentle harmonic movement and suggestive ambience that provide experiences of easy listening, so revealing different qualities of the celadon work. On the one hand, in 'Morning Mood', Grieg gives a portrayal of a crisp, sunlit morning through chord progression that ties the notes into groups of eight and sixteen to render a smooth flowing legato feeling. The harmonic vocabulary and fluid rhythm is reminiscent of a lush green landscape that captures the lucidity embodied by the bright colour and

glaze lustre of the Yaozhou bowl. Its flowing melody is also marked by the consonance of woodwinds and strings: while the main melodic line is lead by the flutes, it is repeated by oboe and clarinet in turns and joined by strings to rise to crescendos (Foss 1950: 17-18; Horton 1974: 199-200). The instrumentation conveys a sense of gracefulness associating with the flowery form of the bowl and triggers in the imagination how it would look set on a dining table.

On the other hand, 'Looking for Spring', a Taiwanese folk song written in traditional pentatonic mode (1, 2, 3, 5, 6), suggests that visitors look at other subtle qualities of the bowl. Emphasising the intervals of thirds and fifths, the melody progresses in conjunct motion and smooth lines, creating a melancholy atmosphere in representing a maiden's lament from a secluded chamber for passing youth (Zheng and Guo 2002: 70). The dreamy tune highlights the fact that the jade-like colour of the celadon glaze is more than crystal green, but is akin to a soft opaque glow, which evokes pictures of mountains veiled in the clouds or gleaming sky after the rain, as traditional connoisseurs describe (Zhejiang Provincial Museum 2006: 14-15). To keep this simple piece of music from being too facile, this bamboo flute version gives it a warm and mellow timbre that renders a lingering voice of the maiden (Cheng 1984: 403-404). The rich tonality of the flute also defines the bowl as an elegant disposition of curves, which is enhanced by its flared form and copper-brown outline at the rim.

In encouraging visitors to develop their own interpretation of ceramic works, the interpretive text aims to promote a more liberal and sensuous

mode of looking, as follows:

‘Does the music sound to you as sweet as blossom in the veil of mist or lucid as bubbling brook? Which piece of music do you think best conveys the aesthetic values of this bowl? In what ways does it express its form, colour or style?’

Chinese artists seek infinite imagination within limited sensuous representation. The colour of this bowl was thought to be associated with the lustrous, yet subtle, hue of jade or the magnifying beauty of mountains. Imagining nestling it in your hands; how would you describe its flowery form? Feel its coolness and smoothness. Does it suggest that you are holding a soft glow of jade or communing with a fresh hue of mountains?’

Appealing to Chinese aesthetic notions, this interpretive text first associates the music with two creative metaphors in highlighting what they may convey to viewers. The names of these musical pieces are kept anonymous so as to prevent any hindrance to aesthetic imagination. It then refers both pieces of music to the Yaozhou bowl and invites visitors to choose which piece of music would be the theme song best suited to convey the inner values of the bowl. Turning to each art element tactilely, it encourages visitors to explore the various sensations the bowl would have triggered, such as the lucidity of the lobed form, the smoothness of glaze texture and the coolness of the ceramic body. It tries to encourage visitors to appreciate its technical consummation by returning to the object itself

and further associating it with imaginative descriptions. This encourages visitors to develop their own interpretation of the object and implies that meanings are multi-layered, in flux and personal. Through the persuasive power of music, it adds another layer of sensuous stimulation to draw the visitor's attention to some rather uninteresting pieces of ceramics and communicate the intrinsic values of objects creatively.

Hence I argue inter-sensory clues, such as touching devices and musical clips, are critical in inviting visitors to consider ceramics' tactile language and accordingly shift their communication with a ceramic display within the nexus of tactile looking. I argue that a touching device is an intimate means of communication that heightens our sensuous sensibilities, whilst musical clips enclose looking at ceramics with another, sensuous layer of aesthetic. This suggests an open, multi-layered and creative approach to elicit visitors' imagination in connecting with ceramics, a form of object usually misconceived as uninteresting and ordinary.

5.6 Looking at ceramics tactilely

I argue that conventional museum interpretation tends to reduce materiality into intellectual discourse, which risks ignoring the dynamic nature of the museum visit. This chapter, therefore, considers how a museum could offer a genuine interpretation of the collection; for instance, Chinese ceramics would encourage experiencing ceramics as a lively embodiment of the humanities.

By perceiving objects as human agents, I propose a notion of tactile

looking to broaden our experience of sight into intersensorial perceptions, which integrate bodily experiences and aesthetic imaginations into the viewing of material culture. To foster a sensuous, dynamic and reflective object-human communication, I argue that museum interpretation should comprise a magnitude of tactility in a sense that blurs the rigid boundary between object and subject and expands a casual browsing or an intellectual scrutinising into an absorbing aesthetic appreciation. Three interpretive principles: situationality, metaphorical understanding and inter-sensory clues, highlighting sensuous pleasures and personal experiences, are then devised to locate the object-human relationship within the nexus of tactile looking. That is, museum interpretation should be suggestive, creative and sensually stimulating in returning to materiality and the human agents embedded within, avoiding detached description, technical terms or historical fact. By highlighting the sensations an object provokes, I hold that the proposed interpretation is a means of empowerment, which enables an object to unfold its sensuous beauty whilst encouraging visitors to make sense of its formal qualities based on personal contexts.

Promoting a tactile vision, the proposed interpretation attempts to shape the exhibition as a sensuous zone of contact encouraging a wide range of audiences to connect with objects and people from different dimensions of temporality. I contend that to see ceramics as more than mundane objects is to give them their human touch, and to render to them a communicative means of connecting visitors with their own bodies, past and present and even across cultures. This suggests object-human communication can be 'mute', and yet stimulating and inspiring in

experiencing the dynamics of material culture, the bodily extension of humanity in the fullest sense.

Chapter 6

Connecting to Chinese ceramics

6.1 What does a bowl tell you?

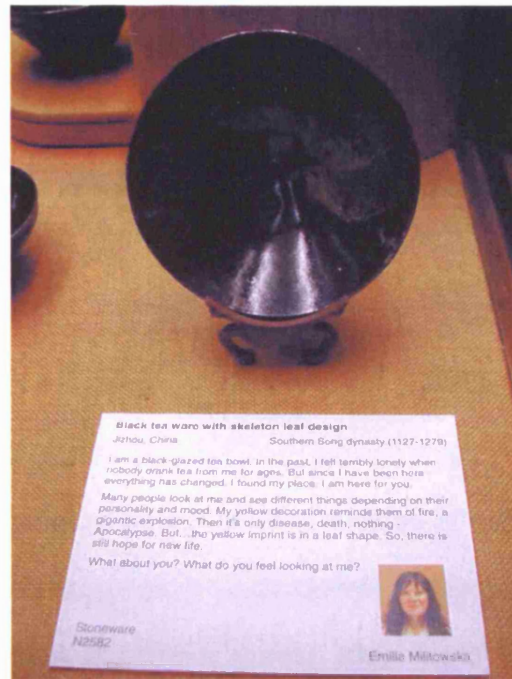


Figure 6.1 Black tea bowl and the creative label displayed in the Schiller Gallery

Black tea bowl with skeleton leaf design,

Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), 16cm D

(By Ting W Y V, 11 April 2007)

In the Schiller Gallery, a black tea bowl with a skeleton leaf design (figure 6.1) sits quietly alongside other black ware showing one of the technical variations of a genre developed in 12th century China. Unlike many of its fellow objects, this piece of ceramic speaks via a creative label written by Emilia, a participant in the interpretive trial that I organised at the BCM. The label, taking 'an object's perspective', reads:

'I am a black-glazed tea bowl. In the past, I felt terribly lonely when nobody drank tea from me for ages. But since I have been here everything has changed. I have found my place. I am here for you.

Many people look at me and see different things depending on their personality and mood. My yellow decoration reminds them of fire, a gigantic explosion. Then it's only disease, death, nothing – Apocalypse. But...the yellow imprint is in a leaf shape. So, there is still hope for new life. What about you? What do you feel when you look at me?'

It is an interesting label suggesting to visitors that the tea bowl is not only a functional object, but also an aesthetic means of inviting viewers to co-create different images out of its decoration. Instead of constructing a history of these black stonewares, it confirms that looking at ceramics is a creative dialogue between object and viewer, meaningful for both parties. In theory, this reciprocal communication inspires people to see the mundane world in a new light, while enabling the object to explain the reasons for its survival over time and its entering into another form of social life in a museum context. However, much to the chagrin of Chinese ceramics, not many visitors would share this view and conventional museum interpretation helps very little in enabling visitors to ease what Emilia characterised as the object's feeling of loneliness. This justifies my alternate interpretive model, aimed at appealing to personal and bodily experiences in order to foster sensuous contact between objects and people. How might this approach inform museum practice in promoting a reflective, sensuous and intimate object-human relationship? With the

support of the research sites, I formulated two different interpretive trials in the MEAA and BCM respectively, to consider how a museum could be a sensuous zone of contact working closely with collections and visitors.

This chapter is a self-reflective summary of these interpretive museum trials, and discusses the potentials and difficulties the proposed model would bring to the exhibition in empowering Chinese ceramics to speak tactilely. First, I review the rationale and process of setting up the 'Understanding Connections' project conducted in the MEAA, exploring how the alternative approach could develop into a museum-led interpretation to sensuously connect Chinese material culture and visitors. Second, I evaluate the 'Creative Space' project, a community-led trial conducted at the BCM, to investigate how my proposed model might formulate another interpretive approach in order to facilitate object-human communication. I argue that these two interpretive approaches were generated from different museum operations in relation to institutional missions, agendas, orientations and visitors' expectations.

I contend that the interpretation can be understood as a living organism that would adapt to various forms of living according to its environment. In spite of institutional issues and concerns, these trials shared the same goal; namely, joining visitors and collections in making objects sensible and meaningful to people. In fact, each project started with interactive workshops, to elicit visitors' input and accordingly develop interpretation for the ceramic collections either through participants directly or by the researcher as informed by visitor studies. Overall, the trials were

part of the circular process of conducting this research that has enabled me to compare the results and reflect on the designs of the interpretive trials and, consequently, bring greater sensitivity in exploring the dynamics of object-human relationships in the museum context (Mason 2002: 72). Consequently, this chapter does not set out to be a visitors' evaluation of the proposed interpretation; rather, it is a critical review of the project development in accommodating the realistic concerns of the museums.

6.2 Understanding Connections at the MEAA

Setting out to investigate how the proposed model could help to integrate a tactile mode into a museum context, I organised a museum-led project, 'Understanding Connections', at the MEAA. The first phase of the project involved a series of four interactive workshops held every Saturday throughout May, the Museum Month, in 2006. The second phase summarised responses from the workshops alongside a 14-day observation at the ceramic gallery during late August. Finally, these visitors' studies helped to transform interpretive materials into activity packs for the gallery. I shall outline the overall design of this project, before reviewing the content development of each of the interpretive themes and unpacking some of the interpretive issues encountered during the process.

Drawing on principles derived from the proposed model and my prior work experiences with Chinese collections, I developed four interpretive themes looking sensuously at the materiality, function, decoration and symbols of Chinese ceramics. These interpretive themes are reflections of the breath of the proposed model and adopting them at MEAA was an

appropriate strategy to test the model's potential. The MEAA considers itself to be an art museum committed to promoting art education in relation to East Asia; thus interpretive themes related to dimensions of Chinese aesthetics and culture are in line with the mission of the MEAA. According to the visitors' comments book and feedback forms, the majority of visitors discern the MEAA's mission and have a clear visiting agenda based on the savouring of the art or cultures of the region. In addition, regardless of their different levels of interest in the collection, many visitors appreciate the variety and quality of East Asian material culture displayed, as well as the informativeness and clarity of the MEAA's exhibitions. The museum had, then, already created a favourable atmosphere for my interpretive experiment in fostering visitors' engagement and feedback to the proposed ideas.

I should stress that the project was formulated to be a museum-led trial largely because of practical concerns. As a small private museum, the MEAA relies on entrance fees and therefore has limited resources to support community work. Museum-led interpretation is a mainstream practice in the profession and undertaking such an approach as part of my research therefore enabled the testing of the flexibility of my model in museum practice. Visitors' involvement was not compromised as the theory advocates a partnership with the museum, collection and visitors. The themed workshops outlined below can be considered as focus group studies encouraging direct communication between the researcher and a small number of visitors, and generating dynamic responses. They created a stimulating forum to test how various themes could work with the

collection and visitors (Marczyk *et al* 2005: 154-155). As there were only 20 workshop participants, I do not attempt to make generalisations, but consider the result as a reference point for incorporating visitors' opinions in the process of interpretation. In fact, there were additional channels for the research to reach a wide range of visitors. While the workshops were held in May, I started to undertake pilot studies with visitors in order to formulate a proper methodology; I also conducted ethnographic research later in the summer. It was through the workshop evaluations and in-depth visitor studies, that the activity packs were produced, to balance theoretical concerns, the museum's agenda and the visitors' needs.

6.2.1 Understanding materiality

Traditional Chinese craftsmen believe that ceramics is a form of art harmonising function and decoration (Yang 2000: 20). Ceramics integrate aesthetic enjoyment into daily routine. However, considering a ceramic collection in a museum context tends to reduce its materiality to visual narration of a constructed typology of the artefacts. One of the critical tasks of my interpretive approach is, therefore, to cultivate sensory aspects of a Chinese cultural repository and transform the materiality, technicality and functionality of the ceramics into aesthetic and imaginative ideals. Informed by the theoretical principle of installing tangible clues, my first interpretive theme, materiality, challenges conventional ways of looking at ceramics by exploring how sensorily to express our experience of art. In particular, visitors were encouraged to tune into a tactile mode of interaction with the handling collection, a process that was accompanied by music.

To encourage the participants to integrate different senses while 'viewing' objects, the first workshop began with a blindfolded activity. I concealed from sight, in boxes, each of the selected handling collection items. Participants were invited to close their eyes and use their hands, feeling the object put in front of them and then describing it to the whole group. I urged visitors to run their fingers over the surface of the ceramic work, cup its body, figure out the proportion of its parts and imagine how the whole piece looked. Afterwards, they were asked to remove the object from its box and compare the differences between their tactile experiences and visual responses.



**Figure 6.2 Qingbai dish with floral motif, Yuan dynasty (1279-1368),
11cm D (© MEAA)**

A participant looking at a white dish with floral design (figure 6.2) said,

'Well, I was really intrigued to see it because I thought it was going to

be very colourful; to see it was white was a surprise, very nice and also I'm so intrigued to see the pattern, kind of looks like a lotus flower, beautiful kind of swirly organic pattern, and it was just beautiful, I was just so pleased it was the way it was. I had to laugh at my analysis and kind of felt pleased at just maybe how touching can open up imagination. If it was put onto display, maybe I wouldn't pick that up...'

My intention, when asking the visitors to describe their pieces, was to draw their attention to the form and shape, especially how each part coordinated with the rest to serve a particular function or convey a style. It was interesting that some visitors, as the above example shows, extended the tactile data of their 'mind's eye' to include visual qualities such as colours and painted decoration. Presumably as a result of their daily visual inclination, visitors were likely to translate their tactile data into imagined visual characteristics during the blindfolded activity. However, an enticing sense of mystery was created by the fact that tactile perceptions are partial and difficult to translate accurately into visual images. According to the visitors' accounts, this enticement motivates one to be more perceptive of tactile data and to be more imaginative in reducing the gap between the visual and the tactile, so seeking to produce a relatively complete idea of the work. In fact, all four participants shared the same view that touching enabled them to discern some of the intrinsic qualities of ceramics that may otherwise be ignored. However, because of limited resources and exhibition space, it was decided that the education pack would not include this touching activity.

As an alternative to tactile perception, this interpretive theme advocates that music would be a stimulating means of suggesting a tactile mode of viewing Chinese ceramics. As I have already outlined, music is an engaging form of art in the ways we express ourselves, define who we are in relation to the music to which we are drawn, and become absorbed into an act of participation. My rationale is that by encouraging visitors to enquire how music might translate some of the aesthetic qualities of ceramics into melody and rhythm, they may be encouraged to look at a ceramic piece differently. To examine how visitors would respond to this sensory design, I prepared two music clips, a Western classical piece and a traditional Chinese work, for each of the selected handling collection items. Participants were invited to choose a piece from the handling collection they would like to work with and then listen to the music clips on an MP3 player. Afterwards, they had to decide which piece of music best represented the aesthetic qualities of their favourite objects and discuss their choices with the group.

Initially, I was concerned about the lack of objective criteria suggesting how an intangible melody might be associated with a tangible object, and the research implications of any association between these two art forms being personal, creative and, to a certain extent, arbitrary. Moreover, it was possible that the visitors would be reluctant to make such a link in case they disagreed with the museum's options; they may have considered this activity to be another hurdle, rather than a bridge for a meaningful object-human relationship.

According to the evaluation forms, however, all four participants found this activity 'refreshing' and 'thought provoking', bringing 'the pieces to life' and suggesting 'another level of sense to ceramics'. During the discussion, participants commented on how the melody, or certain sounds from a particular musical instrument, resembled colours, decorations or the overall style of the objects. These three perceptual qualities – colour, decoration and style – are the most popular points of entry for visitors when looking at the ceramics, yet most lack the vocabulary or means to describe their experiences. Facilitated by music clips, visitors involved in this activity were provided with a sensory means of access beyond the visual, for further exploring their feeling towards particular qualities of objects. Interestingly, they all favoured Chinese traditional music over Western classical pieces because it sounded more 'authentic' and better represented the collection. This was probably because the participants were interested in Chinese material culture and that prepared them to be more receptive to music from the same culture.

Though I was aware that the group size was too small to make any generalised assumptions, the participants' positive responses implied that it would be worthwhile studying how visitors might associate music with a Chinese collection. Thus, an education pack named 'Songs of Ceramics' was designed to invite visitors to find a theme song for each of the selected ceramic works from the permanent exhibition. Ten pieces, including faceless figures, monochromes and ceramic ware decorated with different techniques, were selected because my in-gallery observations and studies of visitors' interpretive strategies had shown their formal

qualities were likely to be neglected by visitors. The pack included a CD player and an information pack incorporating music with a sensuous interpretation of the object to 'translate' the tactile language of Chinese ceramics in a creative way (For an example, please refer to appendix A5). Two musical pieces were associated with a single ceramic ware, so that visitors could choose which music clip best expressed their feelings towards the object's materiality. I realise that visitors may not share my choices of music; however, as a result of my smaller trial conducted for the Bath East Asian Chinese and Friends Group and a group of ceramic students from Bath adult college, listening to music alongside ceramics can be an ice-breaker activity involving visitors looking at the pieces. Therefore, I am convinced that the engaging power of music could help stimulate discussion or contemplation on what aesthetic qualities the musical works and ceramic pieces share.

6.2.2 Understanding function

It is not uncommon for visitors to consider a Chinese ceramic collection as 'lifeless' and 'ordinary'. I argue that it is the mundane perception that numbs the sensory stimulations of a ceramic ware and would have concealed its aesthetic qualities from daily routine. Applying the principle of situationality, the second interpretive theme uses two activities, flower arrangement and tableware setting, as examples of ceramics as a form of artistic expression, setting out to serve both practical and decorative functions in harmony. In other words, this theme tries to bring ceramics to life, by highlighting the bodily experiences and action embodied by objects, in a wider perspective on their cultural and

practical contexts and on their relationships with people and the surrounding environment.



Figure 6.3 Participants exchanging thoughts about the activities
(By Ting W Y V, 13 May 2006)

During the workshop, visitors were asked to step into a role as a member of the traditional Chinese literati hosting a social gathering at his mansion. They first had to select from a range of plastic flowers and vases to prepare three different compositions for the main dining hall, their own studio (study room) and the sitting room. Second, they designed a menu for dinner and matched the photographs of the entrees with items from the handling collection (figure 6.3). These activities were aimed at suggesting that visitors incorporate their physical life experiences into ceramic appreciation and that they experience the collection through their bodies and imaginations. The activities showed how a wide range of vessels in the collection (vases, jars, plates, trays, bottles, and bowls) combine functionality and aesthetics harmoniously. In addition, my interviews with visitors had shown that Chinese food culture and the symbolism of flowers

were some of the topics they would be interested in exploring. I therefore proposed that flower arrangement and banquet setting should be two of the activities enabling visitors to experience the handling collection as an object-human manifold and to unpack the bodily experiences and sensibilities these items would have embodied.



Figure 6.4 Education packs on flower arrangement and dining ware setting
(By Ting W Y V, 19 September 2006)

Throughout the workshop, visitors were encouraged to discuss their thoughts with each other. I then shared with them what literati would have preferred in the context of late imperial China. At the beginning and end of the session, I clearly indicated that this traditional Chinese perspective was not the 'correct' answer, but rather one potential combination, inspired by Chinese connoisseurs' literature. Though all three participants showed great interest in trying the activities and gave positive responses, they were equally keen to enquire about the traditional approach to flower arranging and Chinese food culture, and to ask questions about the ideas on Chinese culture or history that they had encountered through other media. For instance, when I mentioned the Emperor Kangxi, whose reign mark was shown on the bottom of a plate, one of the participants asked

about the Emperor because she had read about him in the Royal Academy magazine.

Also, there were several occasions when visitors preferred to ask me for more information rather than express their ideas. This suggests that these participants were enthusiastic learners interested in obtaining new knowledge to construct their own intellectual framework. To a certain extent, their curiosity indicated an intellectual object-human relationship which would be further aroused by considering the daily life aesthetics the collection embodied. This implies that although the interpretive model suggests there are many layers of meaning one could associate with an object, visitors are still likely to turn to the museum for an authoritative answer. It seems that more interpretive designs should be incorporated into the museum exhibition gradually to convince visitors otherwise. Besides, because of the limited data, it is difficult to determine to what extent the participatory activities described here could inspire visitors to experience the collection as performative agents from the past. Nonetheless, in cross-referring the workshop evaluation with visitor studies at the museum it seemed that visitors would appreciate new interpretive ideas to connect the ceramic collection with a daily life context. Hence, two educational packs, 'Be a florist' and 'Enjoy Chinese cuisine', were designed to invite visitors to match photos of the display objects with pictures of Chinese flowers and cuisine respectively (Appendix A6 and A7). It was hoped that because of the popularity of these topics, the matching games would suggest an alternative approach to connecting with the ceramics exhibition.

6.2.3 Understanding decoration

As the visitors' interpretive strategies suggest, representational decoration is one of the most immediately appealing points of entry in developing a sensuous object-human relationship. In fact, decoration on a ceramic body can be considered as a form of painting showing a 'warm', human side of the object in connection to the artistic ideas, personal emotion and bodily movement of the craftsmen. However, as Chinese painters are less likely to conform to rules such as spatial perspective, realistic proportion or light and shade, the artistic language depicted on Chinese ceramics is difficult for visitors nowadays to engage with meaningfully. The third interpretive theme studies this specific human touch through lines, forms and colours of ceramic decoration, in order to explore the inner world of Chinese artists and their view of the world's phenomena. Turning to the principle of situationality, I considered decorations as performative agents of the craftsmen in re-enacting the bodily movement and coordination of ink and brushes that took place during the process of the object's making.

In the third workshop, I used the famous Willow pattern as an ice-breaker to encourage discussion of how English craftsmen made this blue and white design in a Chinese fashion. Drawing on a familiar image, the intention was to explore visitors' perceptions of Chinese paintings and to offer clues as to starting a dialogue with Chinese artists. As expected, visitors found it difficult to understand Chinese paintings as an art form, harmonising the artists' inner images and the objective world, in which

subject matter is unlikely to be portrayed according to natural rules within a specific tempo-spatial context. Many of the visitors commented that the 'surrealism' in Chinese paintings looked nice and imaginative, while others considered the works 'all look the same' and related this to it being 'primitive', 'unskilful' and 'rigid' (20 May 2006). One participant explicitly compared the way Chinese painters used height instead of depth to transform three-dimensional landscape into two-dimensional painting, to pre-Renaissance paintings which are 'static', 'crude' and 'naïve' (*ibid*). This led to another activity comparing Chinese landscape painting to its three-dimensional model, in order to illustrate the rationale of the art (figure 6.5).



Figure 6.5 Chinese landscape painting and its three-dimensional model (left)
(Illustration and photo by Ting W Y V, 20 May 2006)

The model allowed participants to adjust the angles of each part of the landscape, which illustrated that the artist had aimed to take a holistic point of view integrating different perspectives into one single composition so as to create a vision in which everything depicted is intended to be in harmony. To further empower visitors to understand the artistic language

of ceramic painting, I implemented a hands-on activity to enable them to experience how its basic elements, such as dots and lines, conveys form, volume, texture, lighting and movement from the artists' perspectives. With ink and brush, participants were asked to try rendering different forms of line while listening to various music clips. Music was integrated into this activity to suggest a creative ambience in which visitors focused on their feelings and bodily movements in the way Chinese artists coordinate with ink and brush.

According to the visitors' evaluation forms, all nine participants enjoyed the interactive materials and activities of the workshop. Five out of nine visitors agreed that the workshop brought 'a new way of looking at landscape painting' (20 May 2006). Four visitors found the ink and brush activity inspiring in understanding painting and one of them stated, 'it was great fun and made me link painting to movement and to spirit!' (*ibid*) Obviously, for practical reasons it was difficult to enact the activity in the exhibition space available. Hence, I made an information leaflet by summarising the workshop discussion on how to look at Chinese paintings. Using five display objects as examples, the leaflet aimed to offer interpretive clues encouraging visitors to look at ceramic decoration from the Chinese artists' perspective. Apart from this, a DIY model activity was produced to explain the rationale of Chinese landscape painting, as four out of nine visitors explicitly stated that the three-dimensional model helped them to understand what Chinese artists aim to accomplish in relation to the natural world, and expressed an interest in making a model like this. It was clear that some visitors would like to explore the collection

or cultures via hands-on activities, even though these were designed for children. This implies that similar activities designed for adults would help engage visitors in a more sensuous experience in the MEAA.

Despite all of the positive responses, this interpretive theme raises a delicate issue about cross-cultural communication. The discussions of artistic expression on ceramics led to a comparison between Chinese and western approaches toward paintings and elaboration on some of the distinctive concepts of Chinese art. Although I tried to clarify some of the misconceptions visitors may have had and to make affirmative comments about Chinese art, two out of nine visitors thought that I was implying western paintings were of less value. This dichotomised view of cultures demonstrates that cross-cultural communication is difficult: making comments easily falls into a judgmental minefield suggesting cultural essentialism, whilst staying 'neutral' would deny difference and distinctiveness. It seems that I was not explicit enough in sharing this vision with visitors. My research examines an interpretive approach to enabling Chinese material culture to speak. This is of particular interest because Chinese ceramics, part of the human heritage, seem rather disconnected from museum visitors including both westerners and Chinese people. By proposing a sensuous interpretive model, I do not intend to be a nostalgic 'cultural broker' promoting 'Chineseness', but a creative facilitator connecting people to the materiality of ceramics in a wider perspective. This is beyond the scope of my interpretive model and yet remains an alarming lesson that I should further consider in relation to communicating Chinese collections.

6.2.4 Understanding symbols

Chinese symbolism can be considered to be the visitors' favourite subject in relation to the collection. According to the MEAA, 'Happiness and Blessing', a temporary exhibition on the topic, is one of the most popular shows the museum has launched in recent years. As my field research suggests, visitors' interests were triggered because symbolism offers a quick and definite means that helps in making sense of the collection. In addition to this, many visitors find any auspicious meanings embedded in the decoration fascinating, in providing another layer of cultural significance beyond its formal representation. As discussed, though symbolism is one of the frequently recurring themes for interpreting Chinese decorative art, museums seem to pay less attention to how symbolic meanings have been articulated through cultures, passage of time and human experiences. In the light of this, my fourth interpretive theme challenges the conventional approach of looking at this artistic language by exploring the human experiences decorative motifs would have captured. In other words, it promotes a tactile mode of seeking to feel the artistic expressions and emotional agents, instead of statically maintaining the connotation.

Appealing to the principle of metaphorical association, the activity considers symbols as human agents incorporating personal emotions and experiences or creativity into ceramic decoration. In the workshop, four of the most prevalent symbols in Chinese decorative art – dragon, phoenix, fish and peach blossom – are used as examples to demonstrate a more

in-depth approach to understanding this artistic language. Participants were asked to figure out different connotations of a symbol by looking at a set of clues, including two pieces of literature abstracts, two related pictorial representations and a piece of ceramic work decorated with the motif. These clues were given to highlight the human experiences that have been transformed into different forms of representations according to sources such as folk stories, natural phenomena, artistic traditions or religious belief throughout history. During the discussion session, participants shared with the group their version of interpretation and everyone was encouraged to look at the formal qualities of the ceramic decorations and to decipher their symbolic meaning. This illustrates that the key to understanding a symbol is to look at its artistic expression of the human experience to which it relates.

According to the visitors' evaluation form, all four participants enjoyed the workshop. To understand Chinese symbolism, the visitors mentioned that they tend to look up references, and seldom think for themselves. After the workshop, they recognised there were artistic clues they could have referred to in reaching their conclusion. One visitor said, 'I really found it helpful to link some of the symbols with poetry and to use our imagination when thinking about symbols and not think in a rigid and set way'. It seems that the workshop had achieved its goal in encouraging visitors to look for answers from the object itself. However, throughout the discussion session, it was obvious that the visitors preferred to use the literature as their major reference point, rather than look at the images or objects. In addition, as enthusiastic learners, they were eager to

participate in the discussion and yet many of their guesses were intended to seek responses from me. This was partly a reflection of my facilitating skills, and partly due to the visitors' expectation of having definite answers. Considering both these and practicality issues for the museum, I decided not to produce an education pack on Chinese symbolism. It seemed the topic had already been well-represented through the exhibition, though there was still room for improving the interpretation. Having considered the visitors' responses, I was concerned that an alternative interpretation of the same area would confuse visitors, rather than pinpoint different connotations within their contexts.

In summary, my museum-led interpretive trial at the MEAA was conducted in order to investigate to what extent the proposed approach suggests a different mode of seeking to make sense of Chinese ceramic collections. Highlighting bodily and personal experiences, four themes looking at materiality, function, form and decoration were explored in order to connect visitors with the formal qualities of ceramics, which would otherwise be neglected. According to the workshop evaluation forms and interviews, visitors expected the workshops to be a series of lectures examining Chinese art. After the workshops, all twenty participants found the proposed interpretation 'refreshing' and 'thought-provoking' and some of them expressed the view that the museum should undertake such an interpretive approach in the exhibition space. In particular, the sensory designs, such as the touching activities and the three-dimensional model of Chinese landscape painting, were approved of by visitors for bringing a new dimension to looking at ceramics. Cross-referencing this with my

MEAA visitor studies, it seems that the breadth of the interpretive themes would accommodate the visitors' interests in connecting with the art or culture. These positive comments clearly state that the interpretive themes were well-received, because they provided a link to connect visitors with the collection in its cultural context.

Turning from content development, however, it is uncertain to what extent the interpretive model would help cultivating a tactile mode of looking in the exhibition context. The problem is that visual narration, including text and illustrations, has long dominated museum interpretation, to the extent that visitors rely on text for finding a definite meaning in the collection. Obviously, textual information may suggest a direction, but multi-sensory design is essential to encourage visitors to experience objects sensuously instead of looking at them indifferently. In terms of time spent on doing research and resources needed for installing multi-sensory design, it is a long-term investment for a museum to commit itself to developing visitors' skills in understanding the tactile language of objects. Nonetheless, it would be a fruitful commitment, as visitors agree that a sensuous object-human communication makes the collection far more meaningful.

6.3 Creative space at BCM

It is possible that the 'Understanding Connections' project was well-received by the participants because the MEAA's dedicated mission appeals to visitors who are interested in Chinese material culture. However, it is equally critical to explore how visitors, who would not expect

or be interested in making connections with Chinese ceramics, might respond to this proposed interpretive theory. Since Chinese ceramics can be viewed from a perspective of human heritage, its disconnection from a wider audience deprives that audience of a possible way of experiencing the world and of understanding our existential condition from another cultural perspective. Hence the BCM, an integrated municipal museum, was an appropriate platform for investigating to what extent the interpretive approach would engage visitors without pre-existing interest in a sensuous dialogue with Chinese ceramics. To better work with visitors who may not have any insight into the collection, I formulated a community-led project, 'Creative Space', in pursuit of creative interpretation that would appeal to a diverse audience. Here I first outline the rationale of this community-led trial in balancing theoretical concerns and museum practicality; second, I examine the design of the project alongside the visitors' evaluation, in order to demonstrate another approach to object-human communication suggested by the interpretive model.

The Creative Space project was an outreach programme working with non-regular visitors and the BCM's Chinese ceramic collection in order to improve interpretation in the Schiller gallery. The project was divided into four basic sessions, including an introduction to Chinese ceramic art, a trip to the Schiller gallery, associating ceramics with music, and studying label writing; the project expanded into six to twelve workshops according to the participants' progress in finishing their creative labels. In order to accommodate better individual needs, the workshops were conducted in different modes, such as activities with the whole group, pair work and

one-to-one advice. Through a series of interactive workshops, the students were encouraged to look at the formal qualities of Chinese ceramics and to associate materiality with emotions, music and personal experiences. Each of them selected a favourite ceramic work in the Schiller gallery and researched it both factually and creatively through various art media such as music, literature and drawing. Inspired by music clips and creative metaphors, the participants wrote interpretive labels introducing their favourite pieces to a wide range of audiences. Unlike the conventional texts, the creative labels include not only object name, museum number, historical information and materials, but also participants' personal interpretations and include individuals' names and photographic portraits. This suggested a tactile mode of viewing in relation to the collection that encourages interpretation to be personal, sensuous, and imaginative, hopefully cultivating a global vision of cultural appreciation in museums.

As we have seen, the Schiller gallery is often considered a gloomy corridor through which visitors are likely to pass *en route* to other exhibition spaces without looking at any of its collection. Its old-fashioned design, mixed interpretation styles and limited information demonstrate that the collection is marginalised from the institution and disconnected from the majority of the visitors. In view of the BCM's mission to be 'an outstanding museum' that enables visitors to enjoy diverse cultures, the institution welcomes fresh interpretive ideas in bringing new visitors to connect with the collection. Because of this agenda and the support from Kate Newnham, the curator of Eastern Art, and Reethah Desai, the

community outreach officer, I was able to devise a community-led trail, the Creative Space project, to work with students from two adult colleges, four local students learning literacy and ten ESOL students (English for speakers of other languages) who are new immigrants from Africa and Eastern Europe. To encourage better use of the Schiller gallery, this project aimed to develop the confidence, creativity and skills of non-regular visitors to sensuously connect with Chinese ceramic collections. From November 2006 to February 2007, about 22 sessions were held to enable me to understand the interests and difficulties that each participant had in associating with the collection. As I had been working as a curatorial intern in the BCM for more than three years and had previously conducted a similar project in the MEAA, I was well equipped to read visitors' responses within a particular institutional context. Thus, organising a community-led project would not only address the museum's concerns, but also maximise the scope of my research.

In addition, a community-led project would enable the participants to explore the collection at their own pace and consequently inform the museum as to what would trigger their interest and how to facilitate their object-human communication. Considering the current status of the Schiller gallery, this information would feed into the future development of the exhibition space for it to be a sensuous zone of contact for a wide range of visitors to relate to the Chinese collection. Moreover, while the museum-led trial at the MEAA showcased how my interpretive approach would devise various themes alongside multi-sensory designs, this community-led project would highlight how the approach would provide

sensuous links connecting objects and people. Taking visitors' limited interest and prior knowledge into account, the BCM trial focused on the formal qualities of Chinese ceramics, equipping participants with vocabulary and techniques to adopt a tactile mode of viewing. With regard to the interpretive theme of materiality, music and creative writing was used to inspire participants to look at different art elements including forms and shapes, colours and texture, through their bodily and personal experiences. Though this may seem to have grounded the resulting interpretations within a context of universal aesthetics, some of the creative ideas for looking at ceramics were, in fact, drawn from Chinese connoisseurs' literature and accordingly, Chinese cultural and aesthetic values were subtly introduced into the project. I argue that employing such an interpretive approach can shed light on how visitors make sense of materiality.

6.3.1 Meeting China

My prior visitor studies indicated that while museum interpretations tend to focus on the technicality of ceramics in presenting the history of the art, this is the area visitors are least likely to read about. Even though some visitors expressed an interest in understanding how things were made, their attention span for absorbing technical information was in fact very limited. One of the challenges for this interpretive trial was to investigate how the museum could appeal to personal histories and bodily experiences in order to cultivate visitors' interest and confidence in communicating with Chinese ceramics. The first workshop, therefore, set out to introduce visitors to basic pottery-making technique in developing a

tactile understanding of the art.

I was aware that visitors felt intimidated by technical terms and the complicated process of pottery making. Informed by the principle of metaphorical association, a 'biscuit for *bisque*' activity was designed to associate dry technical facts with the sensuous pleasure of having tea and biscuits. In a literal sense, it is widely known that a biscuit is a crisp dry baked snack, yet many people do not recognize that in ceramic art it means a piece of unglazed pottery, also referred to as 'bisque'.

Technically, both forms of biscuit can be considered as raw material undergoing the process of firing, which results in different textures according to the ingredients and the temperature of the fire. Biscuits were served in the workshop to provide a sensuous access to understanding the basic materials of pottery making. First, participants were encouraged to match a piece of biscuit from an assorted pack to a piece from the handling collection, and share their thoughts with the whole group.

Participants most likely matched their two forms of biscuit because of similar colour and decoration. In contrast with their choices, I also made a match that suggested an alternative connection according to the texture of the biscuits, and introduced the differences in textures between porcelain, stoneware and earthenware. To experience the varying textures of bisques, the participants were invited to bite into the biscuits and compare them with the unfired parts of different ceramic objects (figure 6.6). The idea of glazing was then introduced by dunking different biscuits, including chocolate digestives, oat biscuits and custard creams, into tea or coffee to investigate how the liquid penetrated the biscuits.

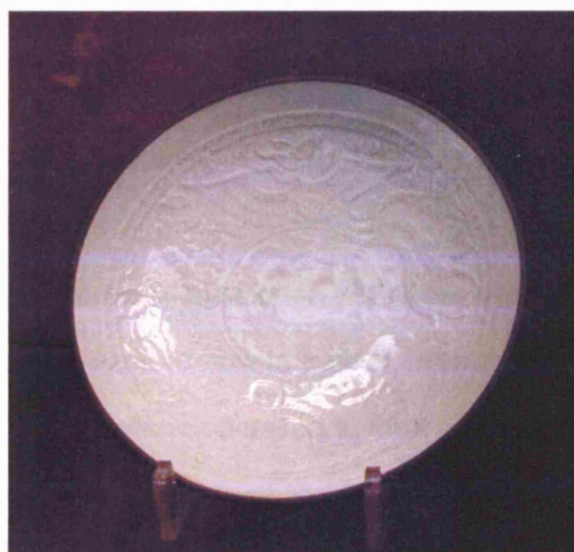
The participants were very fond of this activity, not only because of the tea and biscuits, but also because of the sensuous and fun approach to looking at the ceramics. Eight out of 14 participants explicitly mentioned that they had learnt how to identify differences between porcelains and stoneware and therefore felt more confident when they explored the art. Interestingly, three participants also considered the activity to be a hospitable gesture by the museum and felt respected by a mainstream cultural institution. They rated this session as their favourite, not necessarily because of what they had learnt, but how they felt. This feeling of acceptance was in fact a powerful means of encouraging visitors to participate in the following workshops and produce labels for the museum, regardless of the fact that some found writing difficult.



Figure 6.6 A participant breaks a biscuit in half to compare its texture with a ceramic work

(By Desai, Reethah 14 January 2007)

Having introduced the basic elements of ceramic art, I then followed this session with another sensory activity to develop the visitors' tactile sense. The activity required that participants be blindfolded so that they used their tactile sense to experience fully a piece of ceramic. While playing soft and relaxing music in the background, I posed various questions to guide them through this process. First, I suggested that visitors should feel the formal qualities of the piece, such as form and shape, texture, temperature and decoration, and translate tactile sensations into visual images of how this object would look. This set of questions highlighted materiality that would be neglected by sight, while the next set of metaphorical questions encouraged visitors to imagine the character of the piece as if it were a human being. This encouraged visitors to violate their accustomed mode of connecting with ceramics and embrace their own creative interpretation of this object-human communication.



**Fig 6.7 White plate moulded with phoenixes and floral motifs,
Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), 14cm D
(By Ting W Y V 11 April 2007)**

Before this workshop, the college tutor was sceptical about the rationale of the activity and said, 'a thing is a thing; what's the point?' However, nine out of 14 participants considered this to be their favourite exercise throughout all of the workshops. They agreed that it helped their understanding of ceramic construction to discover that a vase may not be as symmetrical as it seems to be or that the curve of a vase's mouth feels satisfying to touch. From the label writing sessions, however, it was clear that visitors tended to be drawn by visual qualities, such as colours and decorations. They were also confident in expressing how they felt about a piece of ceramic work, although they were more likely to draw on personal experiences rather than immediate bodily senses. Only three out of 14 participants mentioned the tactile sensations of an object. For instance, a participant decided to work with a white plate with moulded decoration (figure 6.7), relating the decoration to a lace pattern and conveying a sense of intrigue and tickling sensations. It seems that more work is necessary in order to cultivate a tactile mode of looking at objects in a museum context.

6.3.2 My favourite things

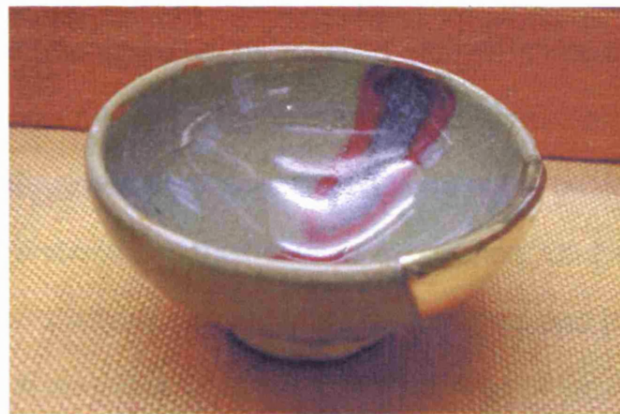
Following the introductory session, a trip to the museum was organised to continue to explore how to look at ceramic work creatively and aesthetically. Participants were asked to look around the Schiller gallery to find a ceramic work of which they were particular fond, and to write notes about the object in answer to questions on a worksheet. The worksheet, 'My favourite thing', was designed to inspire creative descriptions of ceramics (please refer to Appendix A11 for further details).

Informed by the tactile approach, the worksheet attached importance to creativity with regard to ceramic materials, fabrication technique, and expressive form, giving free rein to the possibilities of personal interpretation and a richly dynamic object-human relationship.

Given examples such as how traditional Chinese connoisseurs refer to a pearly white glaze as 'sweet white', visitors were encouraged to use their own language to describe their feelings about colour. With language support from the college tutor, the visitors were invited to express their ideas through drawings or even in their own language if they found English difficult. Interestingly, one visitor compared a blue and white decoration to 'an abstract painting of blue jeans and white paper' while another who observed a big wine jar compared it to 'a pregnant woman with a softly swelling belly tapering to the foot rim'. During the workshop, I tried to talk with each participant personally in order to share information that would hopefully inspire their imagination. In addition, such personal dialogue helped me to find appropriate music clips to correspond to their own personal experiences and imagination.

In order to encourage the participants to feel bodily engaged with the displayed objects, the tour also included activities, 'emotional pottery' and 'expressive drawing'. These activities were designed in view of the observation that some participants were less expressive and imaginative in associating with a ceramic piece personally. Their reluctance may have been due to their personalities or interests, but low self-esteem was definitely a significant factor, with participants framing themselves as unintelligent and empty in terms of language capacity and creativity. The

emotional pottery activity was therefore introduced to assure participants that it is meaningful to associate personal experiences with aesthetic appreciation, given that the person experience is grounded by materiality. The activity divided participants into pairs and each was assigned to consider one particular emotion and find one piece of ceramic work that would express that feeling through tactile language.



**Fig 6.8 Jun bowl with golden patch, Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), 8cm D
(By Ting W Y V, 11 April 2007)**

During the activity, eight emotional responses – including happy, excited, inspiring, relaxed, sad, lonely, stressed and angry – were explored. It seemed that visitors found it more challenging to connect ceramics with negative emotions than with positive ones. However, drawing ideas from the rest of the group, the pairs working on negative feelings were able to direct the discussion to a deeper level of metaphorical association in considering how an object would feel about its formal qualities. For instance, they thought a Jun ware fixed with a golden patch (figure 6.8) was angry because its chipped rim was patched with gold, and a red stroke indicated an angry glare regarding its own status. It was through asking how the object feels that visitors listened to what the object was

saying to them, and they gradually tuned into a tactile mode of looking.

Following the emotional pottery activity, I arranged another activity, 'expressive drawing', to encourage participants to inspect their personal feelings from another angle. First, a 30-second music clip was played to generate discussion of the mood it represented. Participants were asked to listen to the music again and draw lines and dots that expressed their feelings about it. The same exercise was performed three times to ensure everyone assumed an artistic mood to express themselves. On the one hand, this activity aimed to explore lines as one of the basic elements composing decorations and their diverse expression. On the other hand, it tried to integrate bodily movement into drawing lines, and to encourage visitors to look at the collection from an artist's point of view. Compared to the other activities, this was the least impressive in successfully encouraging visitors to look at lines and bodily movement. Though visitors were open-minded enough to experience music with line drawing, they were not quite sure what was expected from the activity. Some considered it to be a creative drawing activity while others were amused at my praise of their 'doodle'. It seemed a longer session would have better demonstrated the different expressions of lines and how these could relate to the bodily movements of artists. Later, in the label writing sessions, only two out of 14 visitors associated the graphic design of their pieces with rhythm and bodily movements. Overall, however, visitors did find the session inspiring in that it enabled them 'to look at ceramics for more than seconds' and they considered this aesthetic experience 'interesting'.

6.3.3 The object sings

During the second trip to the BCM, the idea of uniting music and ceramic appreciation was further explored. At the beginning of the session, I demonstrated how music could be associated with a vase showing a slender neck in contrast to a relatively plump body, and made a few dancing movements to mimic the rhythm of the music and the coordination of different body parts of the vase. It was clear that visitors were too shy to express ceramic form through bodily movement and music. However, this demonstration was meant to be a performative stimulation, suggesting that a ceramic could be viewed as if it were a person and reminding visitors to look for its tactile qualities.

Afterwards, participants worked on a soft and easy-listening piece of music, and were urged to write down ideas, feelings or images in relation to the rhythm and melody of the music. Appealing to more imaginative metaphors, they were asked to describe the character of the music as if it were a person. Next, this metaphorical mapping urged them to materialise the music clip by considering it with visual qualities such as colours, lines and patterns in mind, and accordingly extend their imaginations to tactile data; namely, texture and form. The visitors were familiar with metaphorical association and felt sufficiently confident to make creative links between music, personality and some of the visual qualities, such as colour and decoration. In terms of tactile data, they associated ceramic form with personality and music, and yet they were less likely to consider form and shape in an abstract sense. Some visitors mentioned texture and identified it with different clay materials, but their creative ideas were less

likely to be inspired by these qualities.

As mentioned, the participants were expected to produce creative labels for the Schiller collection. To elicit creative approaches from their favourite piece of ceramic work, I provided them with two music clips according to their personal preferences and mental perceptions of the object. A worksheet, 'analysing my music piece' was used to help integrating metaphorical association and personal feelings and experiences into materiality (please refer to Appendix A12 for an example). To further gather participants' creative ideas, a template of how to look at ceramics with music was also used as a basic guideline for associating four formal qualities, namely texture, colour, form/shape and decoration, with sensory imagining (Appendix A13). The template was original because, as we have seen, there is relatively little literature showing how music evokes the aesthetic imagination, and no extant, objective criteria for how music pieces could represent the formal qualities of ceramics. Although some participants were more explicit than others, all were positive that listening to music was inspiring and expanded their personal feelings about ceramic work into creative ideas embracing poetic images, vivid metaphors and storytelling. Comparing the 'my favourite piece of pottery' worksheet from previous sessions to the 'analysing my music piece' exercise sheet, it was obvious that when participants looked at their favourite pieces again their vocabularies were expanded in some ways. From the former exercise, nine out of 14 participants did not respond to the guided questions regarding how an object would feel if it were alive. However, all ten visitors who had attended this session were able to

ascribe personality to the ceramic works and seven of them even explored the inner feelings of the objects, as the music clips evoked.



Figure 6.9 Celadon bowl with peony spray, Song dynasty, 22 cm D
(By Ting W Y V, 11 April 2007)

For instance, a celadon bowl with peony decoration (figure 6.9) was selected by Lyna, one of the ESOL participants, whose initial reasons included her favourite colour being celadon, the size of the bowl being big enough for her appetite, and the fact that she liked the carved floral pattern. She researched the object, considering the symbolism of the peony, and imagined the two flower buds as a young couple well protected by the leaves. She also described the celadon colour as 'swampy green' 'looking like [it has been] washing through seaweed and waves'. As she related the bowl to happiness, gracefulness and romance, I selected two pieces of music: the Third Movement of Bach's Harpsichord Concerto in D Major (BWV 1054), and 'Transformation in Butterflies' from the Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto, a modern Chinese piece, in the hope of inspiring

her to play with her imagination. These music clips were kept anonymous so that the participants' creativity would not be influenced by the title. While listening to the music, Lyna considered both pieces 'light' and 'elegant', representing the celadon bowl in different ways. Eventually, she chose the Chinese piece because the more she looked at the bowl with that music, the more it appealed to her and the peony spray decoration seemed to her to be in the process of blooming. Working later on her creative label for a couple of sessions, she toyed with the idea of blooming and associated this lively movement with the process of creation transforming 'a mute, thick lump of clay into an exquisite, living body ... akin to a graceful woman', an enigma for her creator (quoted from Lyna's creative label). She portrayed the process of creation as follows: 'the hands of a master are cutting softly and carefully a peony pattern on a clay bowl' because 'he is full of love for his work'. Taking the artist's perspective, she described this 'ordinary' bowl as a 'beautiful stranger firing his imagination' – his Muse. According to her explanation, the idea was partly inspired by the music conveying a sense of transformation from nothingness to life. Interestingly, her feeling also corresponded to the section of the original score that portrays the butterfly lovers elevated from death to eternal life. On the other hand, the curves of the floral motif enabled her to feel how the artist had infused each cut with thrills and excitement in rendering its slim and supple decoration. It was clear that the music led her to another level of creative writing, bringing her former idea of peony and love to a sensuous or a rather erotic imagination of how the artist's hands gave life to the celadon bowl.

It needs to be stressed that as personal experiences, interests and

commitments vary, not every participant achieved as much involvement as did Lyna in tuning into a sensuous object-human communication. In fact, the idea of integrating music into ceramic appreciation has not yet been sufficiently developed to reach any conclusion at this stage. I am convinced that combining these forms of art could enhance aesthetic imagination by suggesting various means of grasping the essence of materiality embodied by each form of art. However, it is difficult to identify by what means the facilitator might further encourage visitors to explore the possibilities of such aesthetic encounter. This community project justified itself in providing enjoyable activities for non-regular visitors, yet more research must be done to consider how to maximise the engaging capacity of music in the nexus of tactile looking.

6.3.4 Sharing thoughts with the museum

As mentioned, one of the important outcomes of this community-led project was putting the interpretive labels written by participants into the exhibition, starting to transform the Schiller gallery into a 'creative space' for object-human communication. A label-writing session followed by individual tutorials was designed to enable visitors to familiarise themselves with the institutional format and to create museum text meaningful and inspiring both to the participants and a wider audience. This session was the most challenging task of the project in that few sensory activities were involved and the discussion on label writings was far less exciting and refreshing than the creative tasks done in previous sessions. Throughout the workshops, I noticed that some participants felt inspired by the creative activities, and somewhat frustrated by their limited

capacity in terms of language skills and creativity. Though as the college tutors rightly pointed out, it was this tantalising frustration that helped participants rise above their own limitations to reach a more satisfying creative experience. However, the degree of commitment the participants invested to overcome barriers depended on their level of interest and whether they were overwhelmed by life issues, such as housing or employment. During the project, two out of 14 participants dropped out because of a change of job and illness. To ensure a low drop-out rate, in individual tutorials I discussed creative ideas and provided as much support and encouragement with label-writing skills as necessary for each participant.

For the discussion session, participants received information packs, including museum texts in various styles and a set of label-writing criteria, such as 'easy to read', and 'imaginative description'. They then worked in pairs to encourage small group discussion. First, the teams had to read all the text and vote for the best label. Second, they were required to refer some of the best museum texts to the label writing criteria in deciding what would make a good label that would inspire them to read. This activity was devised to show visitors the essential components of museum labels, and to ask their opinions on what they would consider as the most important criteria for an interesting label. Five visitors considered that personal stories contained the most interesting information while another five focused on cultural and historical information, and four others contended that museum labels should be imaginative. No visitors mentioned technical information or readability to be important indicators of a good label. From

the labels produced by the participants, five out of 12 visitors expressed a strong link between their favourite objects and personal experiences in relation to their memories, cultural background and life experiences. The rest were inclined to be more aesthetic in exploring creative metaphors and personal feelings that were not necessarily related to their life experiences or cultural background. Whether the labels related to personal experiences or aesthetic imaginations, the text shows that the visitors may have had limited prior knowledge or interest in the objects, and they were able to develop a fulfilling object-human relationship through sensory means. This implies that the community project was effective in encouraging visitors to develop a personal dialogue with the collection.



**Figure 6.10 Black tea ware with swirl decoration,
Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), 15cm D
(By Ting W Y V, 11 April 2007)**

However, as argued, object-human communication is a reciprocal process of object subjectification and subject objectification. It is possible that individual meaning closely relates to personal history which may

mean little to other visitors. As a museum is obliged to serve a wide audience, to what extent is personal narration valid to the public as well as the writer? The negotiation with Maria, one of the literacy students, shed some light on this issue. A black tea bowl decorated with a swirl pattern (figure 6.10) was not Maria's favourite object, but, she said, she wanted to work on challenging her own aesthetic perception. In her notes, she jotted down words like 'gritty', 'mouldy', 'squiggly patterns' and 'earthy' and imagined 'two different personalities' embodied by the exterior and interior of the bowl. Based on her descriptions, I considered that Zigeunerweisen (Gipsy Airs) composed by Sarasate, and Bamboo in the Breeze, a piece of classical Chinese music, would inspire her to look at the materiality of the black bowl. However, Maria, inspired by the Chinese music, saw the object as a Native American artefact and created a story about how a tribal witch had used this bowl for making medicine and saved a child from a mysterious disease. I am reluctant to make such a liberal connection between Chinese tea ware and a Native American artefact. Indeed, Maria had done research into how the bowl would have been used in 12th century China and knew that it was related to making whipped tea along with the intellectual enjoyment of tea drinking. However, I failed to convince her not to go with her creative writing, as she thought it was what the museum was asking for. After many negotiations, and as other participants in the group discussed Maria's writing, I persuaded her to stress that it is a Chinese object and add an extra section explaining why she saw links between the two cultures. I was uncertain about this decision, though it seemed appropriate in the context of helping other visitors associate with the object and in showing the community that the

museum truly appreciates their involvement.

Trained as a museum material culturalist, I found the project a very satisfying experience in enabling me to work with communities and the collections as my interpretive theory envisioned. The process also inspired me to see Chinese ceramics from diverse perspectives beyond the academic framework of art history. As the proposed theory argues, museum experience should be open to feeling, listening and imagining, in honour of visitors as co-creators of an artwork in exploring multiple interpretations. This shows the dynamism and beauty of sensory experiences in reflecting our condition of being. My community-led project incorporated multi-sensory activities into ceramic appreciation to foster a sensuous object-human relationship. It enabled visitors to utilise metaphorical association and sensory experience to explore objects not as 'Chinese ceramics' but as object-human manifolds that connect materiality, cultural values of the object and the personal interpretations of visitors to unfold diverse meanings. Although I am aware that personal narrations may cause confusion and misunderstandings, I argue that these personal stories are as relevant and truthful as the museum's official histories because they allow and encourage direct, meaningful connections to the objects. When misunderstandings arise, museums should suggest to visitors to go back to materiality and listen carefully to what story it would like to tell.

6.4 Embracing objects and people

My proposed theory considers looking at ceramics as a process of co-creation that stimulates us to think not just about the piece, but also

about our nature as artists and creators. Working with the MEAA and BCM, I developed museum-led and community-led projects to enquire how museums could work with visitors and collections to foster sensory experiences in an exhibition context. My projects helped to reveal interpretive issues involved in looking at Chinese ceramics in different institutional contexts. In the MEAA where visitors are expected to learn about Chinese art or culture, it became clear that cross-cultural interpretation may trigger anxieties of how to look at the host and other cultures. On the other hand, in the BCM, an integrated museum where visitors have fewer expectations or interests in relating to the Chinese collection, the problem lay in how to connect the objects with visitors and convince them that objects are meaningful and inspiring. Such an aesthetic experience would inspire us to reflect upon who we are in relation to our history and diverse human cultures. I contend that the proposed theory offers some clues for considering how a museum might work with visitors and collections. More interpretive trials highlighting our sensory experiences should be conducted in order to honour ourselves as sensible beings and embrace material culture in greater reflectivity.

Chapter 7

Redefining object-human relationships in the museum

7.1 Objects are good for ...

Marc Bloch, the French historian, once recounted an interesting anecdote about his trip to Stockholm with Henri Pirenne, the Belgium medievalist. When Bloch asked his colleague where to start in their exploration of the city, Pirenne chose the city hall instead of the museum. He explained:

'If I were an antiquarian, I would have eyes only for old stuff, but I am a historian. Therefore, I love life' (Bloch 1992: 36).

Clearly, Pirenne considered museum collections to be isolated from the contemporary world and capable of offering little insight into how the past has effected the present. This perception implies that museum objects are dead to the living, appealing only to a coterie of connoisseurs and experts. Much to the chagrin of the museum profession, many visitors would share Pirenne's view, in that they find limited motivation and probably resources to develop a meaningful dialogue with museum objects, and consequently, neglect the human experiences they sensuously embody. To many visitors objects are good for rational thinking or aesthetic analysing, but not for sensuous experiences.

In the face of this less than enriching object-human relationship, this research has set out to explore an alternate museological model of material

culture through theoretically-informed, empirical investigation into how museums could share the dynamics of materiality with a wide range of audiences. I have argued that museological studies of material culture depend upon an art of tactile communication that empowers an object to speak of human experiences through its perceptual qualities, while encouraging visitors to undergo connected journeys of self-discovery. Therefore, successful interpretation of the object starts not with objective knowledge but with lives, prompting us to consider the spiritual and cultural wellbeing of all people.

To sustain a sensuous object-human dialogue in the museum context, I have articulated an interpretive model focusing on correspondent repositioning of bodily experiences as the ultimate centre of material culture studies. By turning to emphatic responses, metaphorical associations and multi-sensory designs, I have proposed an interpretive approach suggesting a tactile mode of looking that highlights the overlapping sensuous and emotive experiences shared by museum collections and visitors. Blurring the line between objectivity and subjectivity, this interpretive approach has been developed in order to explore the idea that the exhibition can be a site of life encounters and energy exchanges, welcoming sensuality, diversity and individuality in the process of meaning making. As the interpretive trials in BCM and MEAA show, this communicative mode of object-human interaction has brought new audiences to museums, and also raised challenges in understanding the value of material culture in the context of public life. In this chapter, I will conclude by reflecting on the opportunities and difficulties this research has

brought, in order to show the wider implications of this project in the context of museological development.

7.2 Redefining material culture

This thesis has explored the idea that museums are no longer satisfied with being authoritative caretakers of objects preserving, studying and exhibiting objects 'neutrally'; instead, they are attempting to be public service providers that generate enjoyment, creativity and knowledge in multi-vocal contexts (Weil 1999; Hooper-Greenhill 2000c; Gurian 2006b). To embrace the museum's social responsibilities for good, the intellectual climate for considering how material culture could involve diverse audiences, is changing. For instance, Mark Leone and Barbara Little (2004: 371-372) argue that instead of using objects to construct a well-accepted order of human life, museums can challenge this arbitrary order through material culture and reflect upon the values of present society. Similarly, putting colonial collections into new perspective, James Clifford (1997:210) advocates that they can shape the museum to be a 'contact zone' where different people, previously separated by historical and geographical disjuncture, could collaborate, interact and negotiate various understandings of culture, history and power.

In shaping a new museum culture, governments and other organising bodies also explicitly express the social significance of material culture in their policy statements:

'Museum collections come from a wide range of sources, and can be

used to offer a variety of ways for people to connect with local and global concerns. They have the potential to mobilise a range of emotions and provide tolerant spaces ... Collections offer means for personal identification and discovery' (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, UK 2005: 14)

'Museum usage of collections from contemporary communities requires respect for human dignity and the traditions and cultures that use such material. Such collections should be used to promote human well-being, social development, tolerance, and respect by advocating multisocial, multicultural and multilingual expression' (International Council of Museums 2006: 6.7)

Recognising the ensnared object-human relationship, these statements affirm that the object can be considered as a mediator between oneself and collective life, enabling the museum to play a central role in shaping a new form of public life.

Identifying with the present trend of museological thinking, I define the museum object as an object-human manifold, an active enterprise sharing laughter and tears, hopes and fears with visitors to foster an evocative, poetic and sensually stimulating communication. As my interpretive trials in the BCM and MEAA suggest, this rather fluid object-human relationship does not only serve the purpose of engaging with diverse audiences, but also opens up new potential for interpreting material culture, for instance memories, individual experiences and creative thinking, thus interweaving

personal narration into the grand schema of cultural construction. Whilst the MEAA project engaged with art lovers who were not all interested in Chinese art and culture, the BCM experiment reminded many non-museum users of their ownership rights in using the facilities and interpreting Chinese material culture. By proposing an intimate and creative approach to connecting with ceramic objects, these trials pushed the boundaries of museum experience from rational visual discourse to stimulating sensuous engagement. Interestingly, educators and outreach officers would consider these interactions between museum workers, collection and visitors as creating opportunities for community engagement, and yet some curators would query whether this approach hampers the museum's capacity for being a knowledge bank. Many curators challenged the sensuous interpretation I advocated, especially the idea of integrating music into ceramic appreciation, although they had less academic experience studying material culture (Personal communication 8 May 2006, 16 October 2006 and 7 January 2008). To them, the proposed interpretation was merely a 'fancy gimmick', which could be an engaging educational activity appealing to visitors with no prior knowledge or interest. They argued that the sensuous approach would fail the intellectual expectations of the museum. Instead of uplifting the public intellectually and aesthetically, they considered my model would 'dumb down' the academic standards that a prestigious institution should uphold, and downplay the museum's role as a generator of knowledge.

I am aware that my proposed interpretive model was far from mature and well-articulated. First, I intended to develop a more communicative

approach of material culture for museum exhibition and yet found it extremely difficult to devise a new set of terminology to highlight the in-betweenness of objects and the reciprocity of object-human communication. This weakness can be justified, however, as it enabled the proposed model to draw on insights from a wide range of theories. Inevitably, the lack of appropriate expressions renders the model clumsy and unproductive in empowering objects to take on new roles within the communicative culture of the museum. I realise that in the long run, a sensuous model of material culture should devise new terms or at least modify conventional phrases to explore interrelationships between different sensory perceptions and objects.

Second, the interpretive principles advocated by the model are no more than experimental ideas, impractical and inefficient in developing exhibitions unless museums are committed to modifying their routines, most notably in relation to usage of common name, the direction of object research and exhibition design. That is, museums need to consider adopting user-friendly vocabulary instead of technically loaded terms, in order to offer visitors an accessible point of entry to approaching objects. Moreover, curators have to work closely with educators, outreach workers and marketing officers in developing interpretive ideas, which are relevant to contemporary society. In addition, museum displays should seek possibilities that encourage a tactile mode of looking in extending objects as living agents rather than visual discourses. In this sense, the interpretive principles are theoretical underpinnings of the potentials of object-human communication, but it is interpretive policy which informs exhibition

practices. These ideas require the museum to devise logistic mechanisms according to its own institutional composition and type.

Despite its pitfalls, the proposed model can be considered as an ambitious attempt inspired by recent anthropological discussions of materiality, that proposes a tactile approach to connecting visitors to the intrinsic values of Chinese ceramics. Drawing on various disciplines, such as art history, socio-cultural history and anthropology, it researches into traditional Chinese connoisseurship and aesthetics to communicate a cultural history of sensory perceptions, a newly developed field of material culture studies with visitors. Unlike conventional interpretation, I make no attempt to present an ordered history of Chinese art or culture, nor frame an object within a particular disciplinary context. Considering objects as vigorous embodiments of feelings, passions, desires and/or bodily movement, I highlight personal experiences as an empathetic means to understanding and appreciating why people made such a thing in a particular manner. It is by no means a patronising approach that denies visitors' access to intense disciplinary researches, nor is it a spectacular measure to catch visitors' attention through sensory stimulations.

Rather, the sensuous interpretation intends to demonstrate the complexity of material culture in suggesting that visitors contextualise objects according to personal experiences and, hopefully, piece together a more integral view of human interrelationships with the surrounding environment. That is, the proposed model aims to explore the unsettling and fuzzy aspects of object-human experience, which would otherwise be

compartmentalised, or to a certain extent tamed, by detached analysis. Generating 'object knowledge' in a different manner, it asks visitors to understand the human experiences related to an object, rather than study in a detached manner what happen in the past. In the case of looking at a burial figure, for example, it attempts to show how people felt about death rather than outlining the cultural practices factually. In this sense, I argue that the proposed model also tries to uphold the intellectual integrity of museums through interpretation that is thoughtfully researched and more relevant to those it serves.

It seems then that the critics may be answered to an extent, but what they find most problematic is the idea of integrating music into ceramic appreciation. They do not see any concrete link between this sensory device and traditional connoisseurship, nor any empirical studies verifying music's capacity in fostering visitors' understanding of objects. In response, I have turned to perceptual phenomenology and music studies to justify the trials that reinterpreted ceramic works with music. These notions suggest that music would help break through an object's impenetrability and enable visitors to tune into their bodily perception to look tactilely at the intrinsic values of the object. This interpretive idea can further be justified by the positive responses of participants, suggesting that listening to music can indeed inspire sensory imaginations that prompt visitors to look at the objects more attentively.

Though the music trials were modest experiments drawing limited resources and scant attention, I developed them within a wider context in

which other museums have also made efforts to explore innovative means for fostering object-human relationships within exhibition spaces. For instance, in 2004 the Victoria and Albert Museum launched a temporary exhibition, 'Shhh... Sounds in the Space', for which ten artists selected an object, a series of display or a gallery space, and created audio clips in response. When visitors wearing headphones walked through the museum, infra-red points sited throughout the building triggered the sound clips to perform according to individual routes, so that one visitor could create his/her own sonic journey of discovery (Cripps 2004; Parker 2008). In addition, in 2006 Tate Modern initiated 'Tate Track', an experiment between listening and seeing which involves artists as diverse as the electronic music duo Basement Jaxx, former Blur guitarist Graham Coxon and London East End hip hop crew Roll Deep. Each artist has composed a music piece inspired by an artwork from the museum, and listening posts have been installed next to the works (including pieces by Duchamp, Cy Twombly and Anish Kapoor) enabling visitors to tap into the tunes while making sense of the art piece from different perspectives (Addley 2006; Tate 2006).

Though there is no formal evaluation investigating the receptivity of music as an innovative means of interpretation, these projects have gained favourable media coverage ranging from radio programmes, newspaper reviews, online forums and personal blogs. As diverse as the sources, these reviews suggests music has inspired multiple interpretive strategies, which include the interrelationships between these two forms of art, emotional association, aesthetic imagination, spiritual inspirations and/or

personal reflection (Finlayson 2004; Gavin 2004; Wolfson 2004; Blommers 2006; I like Music 2007).

Combining this with participants' feedback from my projects, I am convinced that the idea of reinterpreting objects with music would push the boundaries of what a museological mode of object-human communication can be, and try to suggest a different kind of relationship between an exhibition's content and the visitors experiencing them. To develop further sensuous dialogue between objects and visitors, future studies should look into the correlation between listening and meaning making; for instance, how music is used in visitors' meaning-making processes, to whom this interpretive means would appeal and to what extent it would facilitate object-human dialogue.

To a certain extent, the mixed comments on my experimental project reveal the uncertainties the profession has encountered in considering a new mode of object-human relationship in order to broaden the scope of museum service. The profession seems entrapped by different expectations of what a museum should be, and has not yet come to a consensus on what material culture can offer to visitors. At the core of these questions lies the dichotomy of object- and people-oriented museum services, of which the former carries, for some, the connotation of knowledge dissemination, elitism and intense scholarship, whilst the latter signifies to others edutainment, popularism and community engagement (Ames 1992; Marstine 2006).

In order to avoid polarisation of these arguments, the alternate model attempts to occupy the middle ground, emphasising the overlapping experiences between object and people and highlighting the museum as a mediator bridging the gap between collections and visitors. I hold that museum workers should not feel intellectually superior because of the precious collections they keep, or their particular expertise. However, their knowledge and passion about objects should inform museum practice in expanding the role of material culture within the context of public life. On the other hand, museums should not be amusement venues putting up 'spectacular shows' that leave objects behind for the sake of attracting more visitors. Nonetheless, keeping in touch with audiences, through channels such as marketing surveys or outreach projects, is essential to fostering a meaningful object-human relationship. In this sense, my proposed model can be considered as one option in trying to develop multi-layered dialogues between collections and visitors in order to enable the seeing of ourselves and the past from diverse perspectives. In fact, there are myriad equally satisfying approaches that museums can develop across the spectrum of objects- and visitors-oriented museum services. The key is that the profession is open to any experimental ideas that interweave the experiences of objects and people, institutional narration and personal meaning making, and the tangible past and ever-changing present, in shaping the museum into a communicative platform.

7.3 Working with objects and people

In exploring the different voices that the collections have embodied, the museum profession has begun to share control over the meaning of

objects with its audience, through community interpretive projects and creative workshops. For instance, the Migration Museum in South Australia collaborates with various community groups to develop exhibition themes which are of particular interest, and also designs a public space for the groups to set up their own exhibitions in balancing the museum's interpretations (Szekeres 2002). In the Horniman Museum, London, Viv Golding used a West African dilemma tale to bring another meaning to natural history specimens that could develop the imaginative capacities, aesthetic awareness and moral sensibilities of school groups through discussion (Golding 1997). As a tribal museum in which Native American communities participate, U'mista Cultural Centre in Canada speaks for its collections through diverse voices, including elders' reminiscences, missionaries' commentaries, historical documents and anthropologists' field notes, sharing emotional responses from the communities and evoking reflections on the colonised past (Clifford 1991). These projects demonstrate in their local contexts the art of negotiating differences in various dimensions. On a basic level, mixed narrations among communities of an event or an object could be contested, negotiated and hopefully reconciled. In terms of museum practices, professional decisions such as conservation priorities and selection of objects for display, would produce differences between community agendas and the museum's concerns, and help in formulating a more proactive policy of collections management. Moreover, community involvement enables the interweaving together of micro- and macro history, in reflecting upon different dimensions of the past. To museum workers, working with communities brings more thoughts on how to define the target group and identify what

issues and whose voices should be represented, and on how these decisions should be made, and by whom, in fostering meaningful communication.

It is exciting to consider that, apart from festive events, museums have started organising community projects connecting Chinese communities to Chinese collections. To name a few examples, the Birmingham City Museum consulted a group of elderly people and their carers from a residential home about their thoughts on some of the Chinese collection in 2004, and the 'One Million Days in China' exhibition at the Burrell Collection, Glasgow, designed a particular space for a Hong Kong family to talk about their favourite objects and their cultural identities (Burrell collection 2004). In these two cases, exclusive exhibition spaces were assigned to display the end products, which distinguished communities' voices from curatorial interpretation. In contrast, the Manchester Art Gallery involved a group of Chinese elders to explore life stories and feelings that arose out of selected Chinese objects. Displayed alongside items from the European decorative art collection in the new gallery of craft and design, the Chinese objects inform the 'Memory' section by offering personal meanings that resonate with the museum's social-history narration of how objects interact with people (Manchester Art Gallery 2006). In another example, and despite generally interpreting objects through words, the National Portrait Gallery, London, invited Chinese families to use the photograph collection and their family albums in creating installations that demonstrated their family and cultural histories (National Portrait Gallery 2006). It skilfully implemented the Chinese families' installations into their

interpretation of family lives in the United Kingdom in comparison to their cities of origin. Focusing on the notion of family, the theme illustrates how Chinese traditional concepts have been adapted into contemporary lifestyle and urges visitors to reflect on their family life in a broader context.

Clearly, these community projects underline the notion of social inclusion by bringing a specific group to the museum, and encourage exchanges among different members of the community through exhibitions. Inspired by this museological thinking, my BCM trial invited non-Chinese visitors to write creative labels for Chinese ceramics, so enquiring how Chinese material culture can serve wider audiences. As the essence of social inclusion lies in embracing differences, I am wary that focusing on Chinese people and their interpretations of Chinese collections could risk homogenising and containing differences, rather than enabling differences to be understood and negotiated in the broader context of contemporary British culture. In fact, Chinese ceramics were part of the international trade, exported to Europe, the Middle East and South East Asia, and promoting design ideas and technical development across these places. Connecting people from various cultural backgrounds to Chinese ceramics helps to blur the boundaries between cultures and cultivate a global perspective in understanding the collections. However, participants in the testing project and some members of the museum were less confident that general visitors would be interested in looking at the collections from individuals' rather than experts' point of views. Indeed, if a community project is merely a show for the people, how can these personal stories help the public to experience the diverse meanings of the collection?

Theoretically speaking, personal experience is the critical key that suggests why and how an object appears in a specific form and has particular significance to us. Encouraging community members to share their stories offers an intimate approach to an object – the materialised human agency from another time and/or space – that balances the detached and technically-loaded tone of museum interpretation. For instance, participants from the Manchester project demonstrated different readings of a poem inscribed on a polychrome plate. A lady who had recently left China for the United Kingdom linked the inscription to her feeling of homesickness:

‘I look all around me but nowhere can I find my hometown.

Fallen petals strew the flowing river through the night’ (Manchester Art Gallery 2006).

On the other hand, a retired gentleman translated the Chinese word for ‘my hometown’ to ‘a scenic spot’, and read it, saddened about the passing of time (*ibid*). Appealing to common life experiences, these intimate and liberal interpretations become the points of entry demonstrating how the decoration of a bird standing on prunus blossom sprig could be interpreted as a metaphor for abstract ideas. To help visitors understand why different readings are generated by different viewers, the interpretation also elaborates that Chinese writing could be understood as symbols or pictorial characters, which create meanings instead of words. The museum text skilfully frames the personal readings within the cultural context of Chinese

poems, offering an emotional perspective to understand the culture. By integrating individuals' voices into institutional interpretation, then, the museum can embrace another dimension of meanings in showing what an object can mean to people - not as an integral term, but within a dynamic interpretive community that appreciates the sharing of differences.

In fact, one of the fruitful results from my BCM project is that, because of their cultural backgrounds, many participants helped to decipher Arabic symbolism or Qur'an quotes inscribed on the ceramic pieces, for the museum. Though they were modest about what they could share with visitors, they created unique connections between Chinese ceramic ware and their own cultural backgrounds and personal experiences that broaden our scope of understanding Chinese decorative art.

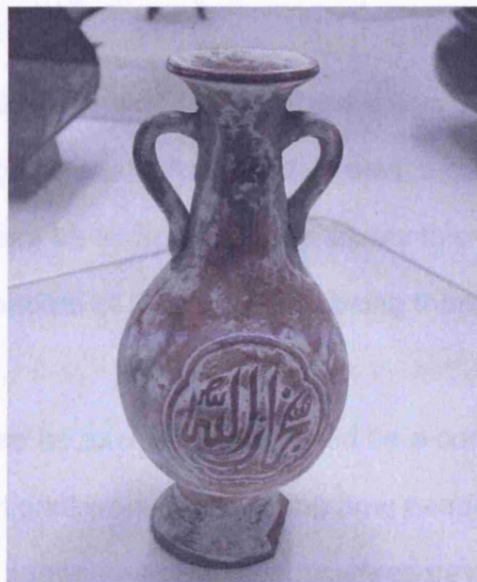


Figure 7.1 Stoneware vase with Islamic inscription,
Qing dynasty, c. 18th -19th centuries, 21cm H
(By Ting W Y V, 11 April 2007)

For instance, Yousef, a participant originating in Sudan, selected a rather unappealing stoneware vase (figure 7.1). As the catalogue record does not mention where and when this piece was obtained, or what the inscription is about, we knew little about it. Based on its design and rough rendition, it is probably a clay mould used by craftsman from the Qing court to make bronzes. During the 17th century, the Qing court tried to exert its influence over the Muslim minority concentrated in areas of Northwestern China such as Ningxia and Xinjiang. The court artists, therefore, produced many decorative art objects with distinctive Islamic styles to serve as political symbols highlighting the close tie between the central and local governments, or as diplomatic gifts issued by the court to local nobles. Regardless of its aesthetic or historical significance, Yousef liked the vase because it represented the Islamic tradition that is deep-rooted in his country. He stated,

‘I have seen a vase like this in Sudan where it was used as a container for incense-oil or perfume. Its Arabic inscription, a quote from the Qur’an, reads, ‘Glory be to God’. You would say this when you are amazed by the wonders of life. It is about being thankful all the time.’

It is certain that the vase he saw in Sudan would be a contemporary interpretation of a traditional work. By showing how people use the wares differently, his text has suggested how ceramic ideas travel across cultures and ages – thus bringing a cross-cultural dimension to looking at Chinese ceramics. Moreover, his translation of the Qur’an quote not only shows what the scripts mean literally, but also offers a personal insight into

understanding the saying in daily usage and life experience. His example shows that meaning is fluid, and can transform from a tool of bronze making, through a souvenir object projecting one's affiliation with one's home country, to a contemporary experience of religious lessons. His personal experience is the key, offering access to the unique aspect of object-human interaction that is less likely to be touched upon by disciplinary research of material culture. Through his label, Youssef shares with visitors his love and respect towards the Islamic tradition as embodied by the formal qualities of the vase. Thus, the stoneware serves as a mediator introducing visitors to Youssef and giving them a glimpse of what matters in his life. This enables the exhibition space to be a community forum embracing the different voices of a multi-cultural society.



Figure 7.2 Milky white square vase, Qing dynasty, c. 18th -19th centuries, 13.8cm H
(By Ting W Y V, 11 April 2007)

However, there is a fine line between sharing personal thoughts and ideas liberally and presenting information that could be considered incorrect and irrelevant. Personal interpretation can inspire empathic understanding, sensuous pleasure and/or aesthetic imagination; yet free-flowing association without rein could confirm established perceptions and deepen misunderstandings. For example, relating a double-handled vase (figure 7.2) to a charming woman showing off her large earrings would suggest that the vase has a character and so, hopefully, invite visitors to look at it more closely. However, connecting a black tea bowl from 12th century China with Native American stories, is confusing. Furthermore, as some decorative artworks from imperial China may not necessarily be relevant to contemporary life experiences, in some cases using personal associations in interpretations may sound casual and confusing, and make little sense out of the collection. For example, an old lady from the Birmingham project expressed her dislike of an ivory carved box because 'it reminds me of a coffin, which reminds me of death. This is bad luck'. It is a rather subjective association with an ivory box which is irrelevant to its function as a treasure box and the theme of decoration showing the leisure pursuits of traditional literati. The text may reveal personal anxiety, but it is not helpful in exchanging ideas or feelings about the object or the culture. The object-human connection here is too vague for general visitors to contextualise it within the context of their personal life experiences or the wider perspective of the object's socio-cultural background. To a certain extent, then, encouraging lively object-human exchanges among visitors has resulted, here, in the ivory box being overshadowed by an individual's emotional responses to it.

There is also a dilemma as to what extent the museum should maintain curatorial control over its interpretation of its collections. On the one hand, the museum tries to democratise its curatorship by encouraging community groups to share their personal thoughts and stories of objects with other visitors. On the other hand, when it considers personal interpretation to be trivial or even inappropriate, it is almost obliged to take over interpretive authority so that the presentation retains integrity. The problem is that in safeguarding the public's interest through excellent services, the museum's denial of certain personal narratives risks defying the trust of the involved group. Maintaining a strong partnership with communities necessitates delicate communication and negotiation.

For instance, working with Terrina, one of the participants from the BCM trial was an important learning experience in considering how the museum can work with communities. Terrina fitted the target audience profile, as she had little interest in, and prior knowledge of, Chinese art and culture. Despite our encouragement, she was unconvinced that visitors would be interested in what she thought about Chinese ceramics. Her favourite object was a blue and white dish decorated with female musicians (figure 7.3), which to her resembled a blue and white Wedgwood bowl collected by her aunt. Instead of showing what blue and white dishes meant to her, the first draft of her creative label detailed her sweet childhood memory of staying with her aunt, detailing how much her aunt loved music and the extent to which the house was filled with Irish folksongs. This creative label draft was too personal to appeal to other

viewers' common life experiences that might be embodied by blue and white ceramics from China. To prepare the participants to share their thoughts with a wider audience, many exercises, such as label analysis and descriptive writing, were arranged; yet Terrina hardly changed her text at all. She was clearly excited by the fact that the museum had asked for something from her, and she would have been very disappointed if I had suggested that what she had produced was not usable. After many one-to-one discussions, and through the help of her college tutor, we eventually worked together to link the formal qualities of the dish to her favourite memory. Her final draft reads:

'I like this plate because my aunt also collected blue and white Wedgwood. Look at the decoration. Two beautiful ladies are playing Chinese musical instruments in an open-air theatre. I feel like sitting close by and listening to their relaxing tunes. Even the phoenixes have come to enjoy the music. Though it is decorated only in blue and white, can you see vibrant colours in the picture?

Did you know?

In the 1700s, wealthy Europeans craved Chinese porcelain. So, Chinese artists designed pottery for European tastes and European manufacturers, including Wedgwood, produced pottery in the Chinese style'.



**Figure 7.3 Blue and white dish with female musicians, Qing dynasty,
c. 18th – 19th centuries, 22cm D
(By Ting W Y V, 11 April 2007)**

Terrina's childhood memories could bring a distinctive perspective into looking at the decoration portraying lady musicians in a garden. By showing how she felt about the decoration and asking whether visitors can see colours coming out of it, her text invites people to look at the piece as if they are included in the scene. In addition, as her text suggests, many visitors would be familiar with blue and whites collected by their family members, though they may not recognise specific decorations and designs. Thus, putting the export wares and European interpretation within the context of porcelain trade, the personal narrative can help visitors make sense of what they have in their household and look further into the formal features of the objects. Terrina's example suggests that personal meanings can be considered as a hidden gem that in some cases fails to communicate itself explicitly. It is, therefore, the museum workers' task to embrace the uniqueness of individual meanings and present them via appropriate platforms to encourage a genuine dialogue between object and

viewers.

In recent years, museums have initiated many community projects in order to experiment with different interactive models of working with visitors and collections. Taking an open approach towards material culture, museums have sought to democratise authoritative interpretation and to make collections more relevant to different sectors of society. However, this interpretive approach may risk ignoring the formal qualities of objects and denying the sensuous pleasures they can elicit. The challenge is how museums can explore multiply layered meanings through interaction between the museum team, the collections and various community groups. To learn through trial and error, museums should document and properly evaluate related projects in considering a felicitous model of community involvement. Moreover, future research should investigate how different models operate, to what extent they enable multiple voices to be heard, and how general visitors would respond to these projects.

7.4 Towards a multi-vocal museum

Proposing an interpretive model to reach wider audiences, I have used Chinese ceramics as an example to argue that foreign collections do matter to museum visitors. In the process, I have touched upon the museological issues both of cross-cultural communication and celebrating cultural diversity. The different aesthetic notions and artistic expressions embodied by Chinese material culture pose a challenge to the museum in considering how to fit the collection into a western knowledge-making system for the benefit of visitors. To help visitors make sense of these

foreign objects and the cultures they embody, museum interpretation tends towards either assimilation or differentiation (Karp 1991: 375). The former interpretation appeals to public perception and knowledge, readjusting objects to fit within the host culture. For instance, comparing Chinese tea culture to wine-tasting in Europe would help visitors to understand the cultural significance of tea drinking. This assimilation tactic offers an accessible point of access for understanding a foreign culture, and yet risks homogenising the differences which become a source of confusion and misunderstanding (*ibid* 377). On the other hand, the tactic of differentiation accentuates the cultural differences, in conveying a sense of otherness. For example, Chinese people would apply the term *meiping*, literally meaning a vase of prunus blossom, to a vase curving out from its narrow base and ending with a contracted neck. Instead of naming it as 'a vase with broad shoulder' or similar, a museum catalogue, seeking to differentiate, would adopt the Chinese term, which may mean little to the majority of visitors. The problem is that this interpretation may exoticise the otherness and, in the process, appear to confirm the hegemony of the host culture (*ibid* 375).

Oscillating between assimilation and differentiation, re-presentation of other cultures in the museum context tends to become trapped in a binary logic of who we are and who we are not. According to Stuart Hall (1996:4), our identity is always fluid, partial and contradictory, as confirmed and challenged by our daily experiences, which produce anxieties and insecurities that prompt us to seek a stable and full identity distinct from 'others'. It is our deep psycho-cultural needs in maintaining a stable

relationship between ourselves and others, that means 'we define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us' (Taylor 1992: 32-33). In addition, the problems of interpreting cultural differences have been complicated by frequent multicultural exchanges and consumption as a result of colonisation and/or globalisation. Ironically, the more cultural boundaries become merged by these less reflective interactions, the more issues of identification are brought up, which compels people to become attached to the dominant rhetoric of self (Fanon 1968; Said 1979; Spivak 1988; Taylor 1992). Unless museums can deconstruct this entangled notion of 'self and others', interpreting foreign collections is an on-going process of negotiation between our liking and others' expectation, which, to a certain extent, accentuates the binary structure.

In undoing the boundaries, I position Chinese material culture in the context of world heritage to explore its multi-layered meanings with contemporaries. I hold that cultural diversity is a matter of life, that encompasses differences across diverse categories, such as geography, generations, classes and gender (Young 2005). As our identities vary, at various times we could be the marginalised others because of social status, health issues or simply because of there being too few males/females in a working environment over-dominated by the other gender. Thus, communication in the exhibition space is by nature 'cross-cultural' in bridging divides between identities related to temporal and spatial contexts, wealth, politics and interest. To museum visitors, Chinese ceramics matter not for promoting a better understanding of Chinese culture, nor for

representing the 'underrepresented' Chinese people. They matter because they help to bring to the surface different voices in society and shed new light on oneself and one's relationship with the world. Through different artistic language and aesthetic presentation, Chinese ceramics prompt visitors to respect differences and to reflect on the logic of 'self and others' in our daily life – a logic that does not necessarily involve nationality or ethnicity. Cross-cultural communication in the museum can thus be understood as an exercise in self-exploration, listening to the diverse voices embodied by objects, foreign or local alike, in an exhibition context.

In negotiating and contesting differences, rather than containing the otherness, Homi Bhabha's notion of 'third space' demonstrates how museums could deconstruct the rigid logic of 'self and others'. Anchoring his theory on relativism and differences, Bhabha (1994a: 55) dismisses any established frameworks, in particular ethnic identification, and suggests occupying a 'third space' instead – a discursive contact zone where 'the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; [in which] even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, and rehistoricised anew'. This notion positions museums within an uneasy context of in-betweenness that tactically associates material culture with contemporary issues and concerns and inadvertently may even appeal to misperception, stereotypes or fantasy. It is in exaggerating difference that the museum can serve as an intellectual spark that collects object-related experiences from different positions and interrupts conventional logics of thinking. Located within the matrix of multiple identifications, material culture studies should not only focus on how objects embody human

experiences, but also take various meaning-making processes into account and deconstruct their articulations. It is thus a democratisation of curatorial authority that urges both museum workers and visitors to question why an object bears a particular significance, whose voices are included in the meaning-making process, and why a particular interpretive approach is adopted. By undoing the established perceptions of various boundaries, the museum can invite audiences to think about what aspects or elements of difference they choose to fuse with or separate from, and encourage them gradually to develop new rules that empower community members to find their identity (Young 1995: 21-22). This merging of boundaries is not intended as a superficial form of amalgamation – such as the fusion of culinary traditions and mixed genres of music – which would render a false sense of fulfilment of being open and adventurous in celebrating diversities and yet ignore the power relationship embedded in such a construction (*ibid* 21). Rather, viewing museum collections can be considered as a deliberate, provocative aesthetic challenge that stimulates visitors to step out of their comfort zone and question how misconceptions come into being and what they reveal about oneself. It is hoped that these experiences would inspire more thinking on new identifications in relation to objects, and new museum practices in embracing differences, enabling the museum to instill in visitors the confidence to be oneself and to respect the differences of others.

I should clarify that the notion of 'third space' is not a solution that harmoniously binds differences together and resolves conflict and suppression with ease. Homi Bhabha poignantly states, 'cultural

differences are not simply *there* to be seen or appropriated' [emphasis in original] (1994c: 162-163). It is 'a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other "denied" knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority' (*ibid*). Cultures operate within a matrix of power relationships and they do not merge 'innocently'. Production of cultures is, therefore, the result of a contested authority, in the case of colonial situations or when one group dominates the other within the same society. The politics of cultural difference urge us to tolerate and respect the 'eccentric others', yet they also bring up fear, conflicts and anxieties in questioning our own identification. This reminds museums that representing the 'others' should not mean eschewing confrontations by including the concerned group through a superficial celebration of minorities' voices. This form of 'inclusive approach' can awkwardly exclude the majority, and probably result in containing differences within the conventional structure of politics. Instead, the museum's task is to encourage exchanges between the mainstream audience and the underrepresented, and to work proactively with the collections in response to contemporary issues. It is through tactically turning to our uncertainties and fears, that museums can encourage visitors into the zone of in-betweenness in order to think through our relations with different identities; ultimately, perhaps, leading to social change (Sandell 2007).

In the context of Bhabha's notion of 'third space', I argue that Chinese material culture neither celebrates difference, nor bridges it casually. The otherness of Chinese ceramics can help museums to interrupt

conventional routines and facilitate the negotiation and contestation of different interests, cultures and values. Museums offer interesting and stimulating experiences, encouraging visitors to enjoy the collections in celebrating cultural diversity. However, future research should look further into the strategies transforming these one-off projects into a natural part of museums' services, and evaluate to what extent these projects provoke visitors' responses and have both immediate and long-term impact on the dissolution of cultural misconceptions and the promotion of respect towards difference.

7.5 Meeting with the object

The object can seem mute, intimidating or boring; yet it speaks a great deal through its tactile language. In this thesis, I have argued that Chinese ceramics can tell us how craftsmen, connoisseurs and literati came into bodily contact with the object and turned it into the form and shape we see today in the museum exhibition. Despite their Chinese legacy, Chinese ceramics can also reveal to us some 'west side stories'. These include how the objects were collected and adopted into museum culture, and how they created new meanings for British people such as Bernard Leach, the studio potter, who infused Eastern craftsmanship into the development of ceramic art in the west, and Oscar Wilde, whose unique aesthetic taste included a room decorated with Chinese blue china alongside other fashionable curios.

To enable these stories to be heard, I have proposed a sensuous model of interpretation that suggests that visitors appreciate a work as one

welcomes a new friend. That is, visitors are enabled to transform aesthetic experiences into a real-life encounter, which communicates the tactile evidence of people's bodily action, social disposition and spiritual existence through material culture. Anchoring museum interpretation to sensory perception, this communicative mode of the object-human relationship attempts to blur the boundaries between the various disciplines of material culture studies, between the museum and visitors and, above all, between subject and objects, in reflecting the oneness and diversity of humanity. It is through the sensuous materials that I invite visitors to ponder upon how objects come into meaningful play with the life of people; to ask how objects provoke reactions from us; and to reflect on how objects arouse collective consciousness and facilitate new forms of public life.

However, as I have been primarily concerned with what objects can offer to visitors, I have put less emphasis on the responses from certain specific groups such as connoisseurs and enthusiastic learners, and have not focused on their receptivity to my proposed interpretation or to what extent they would adopt a tactile mode of looking. In considering visitors and objects as partners in co-creating the exhibition space as an inclusive platform, the next phase of this research should focus on this direction. Furthermore, while theoretical commitment is crucial to museological (as well as other) studies of material culture, researchers must retain the integration of practice and theory: rather than constructing an ivory tower for the discussion of object-human communication, we should never lose sight of the fact that we are working with real objects and real people.

Appendix

A1 Chinese collection from the Bristol City Museum

Bristol City Museum	
Address	Queen's Road Bristol BS8 1RL
Opening hours	7 days a week, 10am - 5pm
Admission charges	NIL

Collection summary - Eastern art collection (Chinese)

Genre:

Ceramics, bronzes, jades, glasses, paintings and textiles

Description:

The bequest of Ferdinand Schiller comprises 438 pieces of Chinese ceramics, paintings, bronzes and jades, among which 27 objects were loaned to the Royal Academy's seminal 'International Exhibition of Chinese Art' in 1935-36. Building upon the bequest – the product of twenty-five years' dedicated collecting - the museum has developed a reputation for demonstrating the craftsmanship of Chinese art and, therefore, is empowered to expand the collection by acquiring other exquisite pieces from collectors such as Captain George Warre, Jack Outhwaite Thompson, and Walter Sedgewick. Most notably, the Museum acquired Burrows Abbey's collection in 1950, which includes more than 300 pieces of Chinese glass, among which are many objects made by the imperial workshop in Beijing during the 18th century – the high point of the art. The Eastern Art department currently holds about 8000 objects from China, Japan, Korea, India and countries of the Middle East. As the process of digital categorisation is still ongoing, accurate figures for the numbers of

various types of Chinese objects are unavailable.

Strengths:

- The breath of the Chinese collection is impressive, as it ranges from Neolithic earthenware dating from c. 2500 BCE to porcelain pieces for the short-lived reign of Yuan Shikai in the mid 1910s. The range of the collection, spanning different dynastic periods, represents a significant development in Chinese decorative art. For instance, the Neolithic period (c. 4000-2000 BCE) is represented by potteries and jades produced from different regional cultures; the bronze age (Shang (1700-1027 BCE) and Zhou (1027-221 BCE) dynasties) can be studied through contemporary ceremonial vessels; the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220CE), the first golden age of imperial empire, is showcased through potteries and bronzes; burial figures and religious objects provide samples of Southern and Northern to Tang dynasties (368-907), a period witnessing the fusion of art among Chinese and different ethnic groups, e.g. Turkish, Mongolian and Tungus; the Song dynasty (960-1279), the revival of Chinese classical tradition, is represented by porcelains from renowned kiln sites, such as Ding wares from Hebei, Jian tea wares from Fujian, Jun wares from Henan and celadon wares from Longquan; and there are fine samples of ceramics (blue and white ware, overglaze-enamelled porcelains and monochromes), lacquer works, glasses, and cloisonné enamel wares, which are evidence of the late imperial period (Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties), the flourishing age of decorative art.

- Like many collections developed in the early 20th century, the Schiller collection is remarkably strong in ceramics. Specifically, there are fine examples of plain white, light blue and green-glazed wares (e.g. Yingqing, Qingbai and Longquan) from the Tang and Song dynasties, which were produced from key areas, such as Anhui, Jingdezhen, Jizhou, Zhejiang and Fujian. There are a great variety of vessels including bowls, dishes, ewers/warmers, tea cups/stands, censers, pillows, cover boxes, and figurines.
- There are important collections of blue and white wares, which highlight the distinctive features from the dynasties of Yuan (1279-1368), Ming and Qing, all significant periods of ceramic development. Of particular note are the many objects made in foreign shapes (such as ewers, lobed vases and punch bowls), or with foreign decorations (for instance, Muslim symbols, Indian scenes or European figures), which demonstrates that Chinese craftsmen were flexible in being able to accommodate the diverse needs of the export markets including Europe, the Middle East and South East Asia.
- The collection of Qing ceramics is distinguished by its variety, quality and size. It encompasses colourful monochromes, different types of white wares, polychromes decorated in a full palette of overglaze enamels, eggshell wares, and blue and white wares with decorations that imitate paintings from famous artists, so displaying the technical innovations of Chinese craftsmen from the imperial and folk kilns.

A2 Chinese collection from the Museum of East Asian Art

Museum of East Asian Art		
Address	12 Bennett Street Bath BA1 2QJ	
Opening hours	Monday: Closed (except some Bank Holidays) Tuesday – Saturday: 10am - 5pm Sunday: 12 noon - 5pm	
Admission charges	Adult	£5.00
	Senior Citizens	£4.00
	Students and Children (aged 12)	£3.50
	Children (aged 6-12 years)	£2.00

Collection summary - Chinese collection

Genre:

Ceramics, jades, bronzes, bamboo carvings and ivories

Description:

The majority of the collection comes from Brain McElney, who has been collecting objects of East Asian art for 35 years. McElney was one of the few British members of the Minchiu Society, a local collectors' club and the chairperson of the Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong (1977-79). His collection focuses on Chinese ceramics from the Song to Qing dynasties together with a great variety of decorative art objects made in materials such as ivory, jade, lacquer, bamboo and rhino horn. Most of the additional objects donated by other private collectors fall into the realm of ethnography, compassing textiles, puppets and prints from different regions in China and many South East Asian countries.

Strengths:

- As McElney collected ceramics from Hong Kong, the Philippines and Indonesia, the museum houses a remarkable collection of Chinese export wares, which were sent to markets in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, as well as to ports round the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf from the 7th to the 18th centuries. These objects help in exploring the history and diversity of ceramic wares produced in folk kilns, and international trade for potteries in Chinese history, especially during the relatively unknown period from the 7th to the 14th centuries.
- The Chinese ceramic collection is strong in various types of white wares (e.g. Yingqing, Qingbai and Dehua) from the 10th to the 17th centuries, producing major kiln sites, such as Hebai, Zhengjian, Jianxi and Fujian.
- The blue and whites from the late Ming dynasty are fine samples reflecting the relationship between ceramic decoration and painting styles and the dynamics of folk kiln production at the period.
- There are small numbers of exquisite pieces of Yixing tea wares from the 18th to the 20th centuries, some of which are signed by renowned potters, such as Hui Yigong.

A3 The participants' profiles from the 'Understanding connection' project at the Museum of East Asian Art

In total, 20 adults joined the series of workshops in May 2006, among which there were 16 women and seven men. All of them were white British. In terms of visitors' ages, the majority of participants fell into the age groups of 20-29 and 30-39. Compared to the visitors' surveys conducted by the museum in 2005 and 2006 respectively, the majority of regular visitors were middle-aged adults (40-49 and 50-59) and senior citizens (60 or above).

Age group	Number
20-29	6
30-39	7
40-49	2
50-59	1
60 or above	4
Total	20

Table A3.1 Number of the visitors by age

All of the participants live in the region of Bath and Somerset and had visited the Museum before. More than half of them visited the museum regularly, while four visitors rarely paid a visit and only came to the workshops along with family members or friends.

First visit	0
Rarely	4
Occasionally	5
Regularly	11
Total	20

Table A3.2 Frequency of visiting the Museum

Most of the participants demonstrated an interest in art and culture. There were 16 out of 20 participants who were interested in art and culture in general, whilst slightly less than half of them expressed a personal interest in Chinese art and culture. According to the discussions during the workshops, many visitors included Chinese objects in their interest in art and culture, as they perceived this to be significant sector in world culture. However, they found it difficult to make sense of Chinese art and culture in museums, or in many other medium, such as TV programmes. Few visitors had a limited interest in Chinese art and culture, and yet they were positive about participating in activities related to art and culture in general. Nonetheless, most of the visitors pursued their interest in Chinese art and culture through informal learning resources or related leisure activities. It seems that most of them had a general or limited knowledge of Chinese art and culture.

Level of interest	Chinese art & culture	Art & culture in general
Very high	2	6
High	6	10
Average	8	4
Low	4	0
Very low	0	0
Total	20	20

Table A3.3 Level of interest in Chinese art and culture and art and culture in general

Related activities	Regularly	Occasionally	Never	Total
Magazines	4	4	12	20
TV programmes	6	11	3	20
Travelling	0	3	17	20
Attending courses	1	6	13	20
Volunteering	2	0	18	20

Table A3.4 Other activities related to Chinese art and culture

A4 Evaluation form from the 'Understanding connection' project

This workshop is part the research project, 'Communicating Chinese Ceramics: A Study of Material Culture Theory in Selected Museums in Britain'. Your participation will help museums to interpret Chinese collections in a more dynamic and engaging way.

Thank you for attending the workshop. Please take a moment to complete the following evaluation. Your feedback will help improve future workshops and make a significant contribution to my research project.

Workshop Title: _____ Date: _____

Overall, how would you rate this workshop?

1. How would you rate the content of the workshop?

Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor
-----------	------	------	------	-----------

2. How would you rate the hands-on activities?

Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor
-----------	------	------	------	-----------

3. How would you rate the facilitator's knowledge in the subject?

Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor
-----------	------	------	------	-----------

4. How would you rate the facilitator's style of presentation?

Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor
-----------	------	------	------	-----------

5. How would you rate the pace of the workshop?

Too fast	Just right	Too slow
----------	------------	----------

6. What did you like best or find most interesting about this workshop?

7. What did you find least helpful? How could this workshop improve?

8. Any other comments? (use the back of this sheet if necessary):

9. Can you tell me more about yourself? The Information will only be used to analyse the workshops.

A/ Age group:

☐ 20-29 ☐ 30-39 ☐ 40-49 ☐ 41-50 ☐ 51-60

B/ Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

C/ What do you perceive your ethnic background to be?

Please state: _____

D/ How often do you visit the Museum of East Asian Art?

☐ First visit ☐ Rarely ☐ Occasionally ☐ Regularly

E/ How do you rate your level of interest in Chinese art and culture?

Very high	High	Average	Low	Very low
-----------	------	---------	-----	----------

F/ How do you rate your level of interest in art and culture in general?

Very high	High	Average	Low	Very low
-----------	------	---------	-----	----------

G/ Other than from museum, how do you obtain knowledge about Chinese art and culture?

Magazines:

Regularly	Occasionally	Never
-----------	--------------	-------

TV programmes:

Regularly	Occasionally	Never
-----------	--------------	-------

Travelling:

Regularly	Occasionally	Never
-----------	--------------	-------

Attending courses:

Regularly	Occasionally	Never
-----------	--------------	-------

Volunteering:

Regularly	Occasionally	Never
-----------	--------------	-------

10. Will you be interested in participating in an interview about how your museum experience in relation to the Chinese collection? If yes, would you please leave me your contact details, I will set up the interview at your most convenient time.

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Telephone: _____

A5 An example from the education pack, 'Songs of Ceramics'

In considering a sensuous interpretive approach of material culture, I have sought to highlight, in a museum setting, the essential nature of things by cultivating sensory interests that inspire aesthetic appreciation. 'Songs of Ceramics' is therefore an educational pack which attempts to transform material, skill and function into tactile imagination, by looking at ceramic wares alongside listening to music. Here is an example of this creative interpretation (Figure A1).

❶ Moulded dish with phoenix

Jin dynasty, late 12th century

BATEA 94

This dish is decorated with mouldings depicting phoenix among scroll-like decoration with camellia form. Probably deriving from a metal pattern, this decoration is exuberant in style, yet avoids being too noisy. Its pattern may be unrecognizable, yet it serves as an invitation to take a closer look.

Imagine running your fingers over the decorations and making full tactile contact with the piece. Take notice of the character of the glaze and how it works together with the delicate pattern. Is the glaze thin or thick? Have you found any bubbles in the glaze?

Do you think the musical pieces, 01 and 02, represent some of the aesthetic aspects of this dish? In what ways do they express its form, colour or style?

(If you are interested in knowing the titles of the music, please refer to the reference at the back of this package.)



Figure A5 Moulded dish with phoenix, Jin dynasty, late 12th century, 11cm D (© MEAA)

According to my visitors' studies at the MEAA, visitors were likely to ignore the delicate moulded pattern, the smoothness of the white glaze and its refined texture. The education pack thus encouraged visitors to look at this white, moulded dish tactilely while listening to Chopin's piano solo piece, *Berceuse* (Op. 57), and *Spring Snow* (Yangchun baixue), a Chinese pipa (plucked Chinese string instrument) solo work. Chopin's work is soft and lyrical which highlights the sophisticated craftsmanship of a rather 'visually uninteresting' object. On the other hand, the Chinese music was selected because of its calm melody occasionally interrupted by vigorous rhythm, in order to stress the drama between the flowing lines of decoration and the geometric profile of the square dish.

A6 An example from the education pack, 'Be a florist'

Informed by the interpretive principle of situationality, I have explored how Chinese ceramics can be put into the context of daily activities and have offered a more lively approach to looking at the museum collection. The education pack, 'Be a Florist' briefly introduces the traditional art of flower arrangement in China and includes some tips for selecting appropriate materials, flowers and containers. The hand-on activity selects five vases from the museum display and invites visitors to find floral compositions by matching the photos of flowers to that of the vases (Figure A2). Turning to traditional aesthetic notions, it provides a way of demonstrating a different perspective when looking at a form of vase.



**A6 A suggested composition of plum blossom and camellia in a meiping vase,
Mirror black meiping, Qing dynasty (1644-1911)
(By Ting W Y V, 18 July 2006)**

Meiping (literally a 'vase for plum blossom') vases are renowned for their narrow mouths, short necks, broad shoulders and slender bodies that form an elegant curve towards the base. The vase was so named because Chinese collectors thought its narrow mouth could only contain the thin branches of plum blossom.

Florists would agree that the gnarled branches of the plum blossom plant magnify the linear form of meiping. The mirror black colour of this vase bestows upon the plants a sense of solemnity. This is consistent with the Chinese view that the plum blossom flourishes in solitude during frosty winters, rather than following other plants, which bloom in cheerful spring. To confer a sense of rhythm upon the floral composition, the pink camellia flower is introduced to offer a focal point, whilst pine adds clusters of fresh green to coordinate the form and fill the composition with various shades of colour. Such an arrangement would decorate a scholar's studio with sophisticated grace.

A7 An example from the education pack, 'Enjoy Chinese cuisine'

A considerable number of Chinese ceramic objects were used as dinning wares. From informal conversations with visitors, it appears that many of them easily relate to Chinese food culture, but not culinary wares. Attempting to put the collection into the context of daily life, the education pack 'Enjoy Chinese cuisine', outlines the Chinese culture of food and culinary wares according to a traditional connoisseur's perspective. Its hand-on activity chooses eight pieces of dinning ware from the museum collection and encourages visitors to match the Chinese dishes with appropriate tableware from the photos.



**A 7 Stewed tofu and vegetables (left) (By Ting W Y V, 18 September 2005);
Yaozhou celadon saucer with moulded and carved floral decoration (right),
Jin dynasty, 12th century (©MEAA)**

Stewing is one of the favoured cooking methods to combat the chilling winter. It is a warm and delicious idea to have stewed vegetable or meat dishes on the New Year's Eve menu as the Chinese New Year starts between late January and early February (according to the lunar calendar).

Among a wide range of ingredients, a dish of stewed tofu and vegetables or meat is considered to convey best wishes to everyone in a family. Tofu, made from soya beans, contains high quality vegetable protein, calcium, and unsaturated fat, which is considered to be healthy for all ages. A dish of stewed tofu with vegetables or meat would express the wish for peace and health for everyone in the family.

Serving stewed tofu and vegetables in a deep dish like this one would enable people to serve themselves from the middle of a round table. Also, its shade of celadon would match nicely with the black moss and darkish brown mushroom. As the saucer is gradually emptied, its lotus pattern – a symbol of harmony - would be revealed to everyone.

A8 Participants' profiles from the 'Creative Space' project at the Bristol City Museum

The 'Creative Space' project was part of the museum outreach programme that aimed to improve existing interpretation of museum collection. Initially, there were 14 participants, four from the literacy learning course and eight from the ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) course joining this project. However, two of the ESOL students dropped out for different reasons: change of job and illness in early stage of the project, thus 12 participants were included in this analysis.

There were nine women and three men involved in this project. In terms of age, there was quite an even spread, despite there being slightly more participants aged 30-39. Compared to the visitors survey conducted by the museum in 2006, the majority of regular visitors were aged 40 or above. The age groups 20-29 and 30-39 were less likely to visit the museum regularly.

Age group	Number
20-29	2
30-39	5
40-49	2
50-59	3
60 or above	0
Total	12

Table A8.1 Number of the visitors by age

The four women from the learning literacy course were white British people whilst the ESOL group (five women and three men) were new immigrants coming from Europe and Africa (Table A8.2). The literacy group

had visited the museum before as they had joined another outreach programme, 'Stuff of Life' in 2005. However, the group rarely visited the museum. In the case of the ESOL group, none of the participants had visited the museum before and some of them expressed an interest in joining other museum activities with their family members after the project.

Country of origin	Number
UK	4
Poland	2
Spain	1
Algeria	2
Somalia	3
Sudan	1
Total	12

Table A8.2 Number of the visitors by country of origin

Few of the participants stated that they were interested in art and culture in general. Only one participant explicitly showed an interest in ceramic art and five of them had attended pottery classes. It is clear that the majority of participants had a limited interest in the art of ceramics. In addition, all of them had limited prior knowledge of and interest in Chinese art and culture. Their tutors were well-aware of this, and introduced the project to their groups by preparing exercises, such as story-telling, to cultivate a general interest about the culture.

A9 Evaluation form for the 'Creative space' project (delivered at each section)



Feedback Form

30.11.06



Tick or write your answers	Yes	No	Don't know
1. I enjoyed the session today	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
What did you like best? Connecting pieces of music with pieces of ceramics.			
2. I learned something new	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
What did you learn? I didn't realise that the Chinese didn't like colour in the ceramics everything they see is in black or white because colour would camouflage what the actual ceramic would be like.			
3. I did something new	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
What did you do? I chose a ceramic to describe which I would've normally chose. It was a challenge!			
4. I changed my attitude about something today	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
What was the change? Just because a piece of ceramics are dull in colour doesn't mean that it's not interesting.			
5. How can we improve the session? Longer session please! Same place same time next week!			

A10 Overall evaluation questionnaire for the 'Creative Space' project

Now that the project is finished. It is time to think about the work you have done and what you have learnt.

So, take a few minutes to think about and write your responses to the questions below.

1. When you first heard about the project, how did you feel about it?
2. What were the three most enjoyable activities?
3. Which activities did you not enjoy?
4. How did the project help you understand the art of Chinese ceramics?
5. How did the project help you improve your English? Think about speaking, listening, reading and writing?
6. What new things did you learn about yourself?
7. Would you like to do another project like this? Why?
8. How do you feel about the project now that it is finished?
9. Are there any comments you would like to make?

Thank you for taking part in the project and for giving us your feedback!

A11 'My favourite thing' worksheet

This worksheet was designed to encourage participants to relate to their favourite piece of pottery personally and creatively, and to build an oral narrative about it. Here is the layout of the worksheet:



My favourite piece of pottery



You are going to write a piece about the object in the gallery you like most.

First of all, walk around the gallery looking closely at all the objects.

Find one you particularly like and spend a few minutes looking at it and thinking about it.

Then, write notes about it here - write in your own language if you don't know the words in English!

Draw a sketch of your object here:

Describe the shape / form of your object – e.g. short neck, broad shoulders, plump body, slender waist

Describe its texture. Is the surface **smooth** or **coarse**? Is the body **thick** or **thin**? Is it **porcelain** or **stoneware**?

What colour is it? Be creative! 'sweet white', 'chilli red', 'noisy purple'. Is the glaze **smooth** or **cracked**, **thick** or **thin**?

Describe its decoration. What does its pattern look like? Does it have pictures? Is there a story?
If it was a person, how would you describe his/her characters?

**Now, what can you find out about your object? Is there a label?
If not, ask Vivian!**

Why do you like it?

If you took it home where would you keep it?

**If you gave it to someone as a present, who would you give it to
and why?**

Your object is old and , if you listen carefully, it can tell you a lot of stories.

When it was happy?

And when was it sad?



How does it feel about being in a museum?

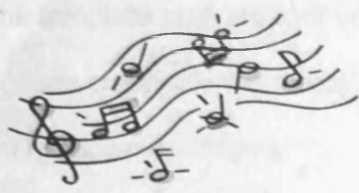
And how do **you** feel when you look at it?

Now you have a lot of notes that you can use to write a piece about you favourite object.

A12 An 'analysing my music piece' worksheet from a participant, demonstrating how music can integrate into ceramic appreciation

In expanding the participants' creative language, this worksheet suggests how to associate music with the formal qualities of ceramics. As participants were less confident in talking about form and shape, I encouraged them to associate these qualities with the physical characteristics and personality of a person. Hence, the questions about rhythm can be considered as an imaginative approach in relating music to the vessels' form. Here is an example from one of the participants, demonstrating how two music clips can inspire different aesthetic and imaginary associations.

Analysing my music piece 1	
Your name:	
 <p><u>Colour</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What colours does the music make you think of? <p>Orange:</p>	<p><u>Texture</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you could touch the music, how would it feel? <p>smooth, rough, <u>silky</u>, sticky, wet, dry glossy, <u>shiny</u>, thick, thin, coarse, fine</p>
<p><u>Rhythm</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the rhythm of the music <p>Quite sad,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If your music was a person, how would you describe his/her physical characteristics? <p>active, pretend to be happy, elegant, pretty, Dark complexion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If your music was a person, how would you describe their personality? <p>Weak, pretend to be happy, lost, free</p>	<p><u>Decoration</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can you imagine lines and patterns? Draw them!  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the music make you think of a story? What story? <p>Someone who lost something very important for him and try to find it.</p>



Analysing my music piece 2

Your name:

Colour

- What colours does the music make you think of?

multi colour

Texture

- If you could touch the music, how would it feel?

smooth rough, silky, sticky, wet, dry
glossy, shiny, thick, thin, coarse, fine

Rhythm

- Describe the rhythm of the music

Slow, relaxin

- If your music was a person, how would you describe his/her physical characteristics?

Rin, asian, long black hair

- If your music was a person, how would you describe their personality?

Calm, nice, passion,
responsible, helpful, active

Decoration

- Can you imagine lines and patterns? Draw them!

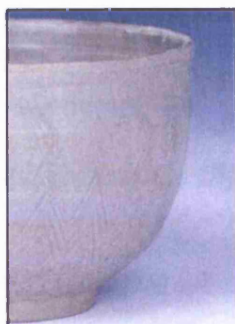


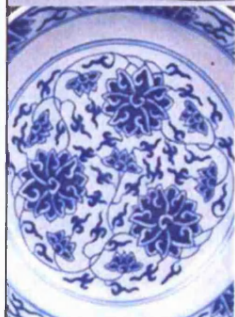


- Does the music make you think of a story?
- What story?

The old life of chinese people. How they are hard working, like what they do (eat) with their traditional clothes.

A13 'How to look at ceramics with music' template

The template outlines four sets of questions, encouraging participants to associate creatively the formal qualities of ceramic works with music. Its content is shown as follows:

	<p>👁 👁 How to look at ceramic with music? 👁 👁</p> <p><u>Texture</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ How would you describe the body of this piece, thick or thin?➤ Look carefully at the texture of the piece. Does its texture look refined or coarse? Could you tell whether it is a piece of porcelain, stoneware or earthenware?➤ Imagine feeling the piece with your hands, how would your music clip describe this feeling? <p><u>Glaze & Colour</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ How would you describe the glaze, smooth/crackle, thick/thin?➤ How would you describe the colour of the glaze? Be creative! Would you describe it as 'sweet white', 'chili red', 'noisy purple' or 'the green extracted from thousands of mountains'?➤ How would the flow of your music clip express the personality of the colour/glaze? <p><u>Form</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ How would you describe the form of the work? Does it have a short neck, broad shoulder or plumb body, or does it look slender with an elegant curve?➤ Imagine this piece as a person, how would the music describe him/her? <p><u>Decoration</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ How would you describe the decoration on the piece? How would your music clip create its mood?➤ Does it have a pattern? What does the pattern look like? How would the music represent the character of the lines and colours?➤ Does it have pictures? What does the picture look like? With the clues from the music, could you tell a story from the picture?
	
	
	

A14 Creative labels displayed in the Schiller gallery

In the 'Creative Space' project, four local learning literacy students and eight ESOL students (English for speakers of other languages) participated in a series of workshops about Chinese art of ceramics. Each student selected a favourite ceramic in the Schiller Gallery, researched it both factually and creatively through metaphor and then wrote a new label for their object. The students also explored the chosen item through music and chose a music clip to interpret their object.

➤ Creative labels written by the literacy students

Participant	Ange Cowley
Favourite object	White dish with phoenixes and flowers, Song dynasty, (960-1207)
Creative label	<p>This dish tells me a story of love in paradise.</p> <p>Imagine gentle music playing, birds singing, and soft rain falling. A pair of Chinese lovers sails down a river through a humid tropical forest for a new life away of their disapproving parents. Sadly, the boy's father finds them and shoots them both out of shame.</p> <p>As life drains from their young bodies, two beautiful birds rise high into the sky. Together, they spend eternity in a peaceful place. Each day they peck, peck and peck at the leaves of the trees. What are they hoping for?</p>
Music	Soul Bird in Infinite Blue, performed by David and Steve Gordon

Participant	Maria Lloyd
Favourite object	Black tea ware with feathery pattern, Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279)
Creative label	<p>Drinking tea from this bowl is wholesome and earthy because the tea is grown in earth and poured into clayware. You feel the warmth of the tea around the bowl; you smell it and in its interweaving feathery pattern, you can see an eagle flying high through the sky with its huge white wings. This bowl symbolises a way of walking with the earth as opposed to walking upon it. I associate it with the way which being a Native American is mainly coming from within.</p> <p>Did you know?</p> <p>Like Native American culture, ancient Chinese people believed we are part of nature and should live harmoniously within it.</p>
Music	Bamboo in the Spring, ensemble of bamboo instruments

Participant	Susan Snook
Favourite object	Blue and white vase with landscape decoration, Transitional period, about 1650-1750
Creative label	<p>I like how this vase is decorated. There are different shades of blue – clear blue, crystal blue and misty blue, making me feel relaxed.</p> <p>My life is busy and my daughter is always on the go. I</p>

	<p>look forward to every Saturday for a lie-in. What a lovely break to be on the boat, with not a care in the world.</p> <p>I can hear the trees waving in the breeze, the splashes of the waterfall and the birds in the background.</p>
Music	Mocking Bird, performed by Jazz A Bye Quartet

Participant	Terrina Wall
Favourite object	Blue and white dish with female musicians, Qing dynasty, about 1700-1800
Creative label	<p>I like this plate because my aunt also collected blue and white Wedgewood. Look at the decoration. Two beautiful ladies are playing Chinese musical instruments in an open-air theatre. I feel like sitting close by and listening to their relaxing tunes. Even the phoenixes have come to enjoy the music.</p> <p>Though it is decorated only in blue and white, can you see vibrant colours in the picture?</p> <p>Did you know?</p> <p>In the 1700s, wealthy Europeans craved Chinese porcelain. So, Chinese artists designed pottery for European tastes and European manufacturers including Wedgewood, produced pottery in Chinese style.</p>
Music	Water Suite, performed by Rose Wynde

➤ Creative labels written by the ESOL students

Participant	Yousef Alamin
Favourite object	Stoneware with Islamic inscription, Qing dynasty, about 1700-1900
Creative label	<p>I like this vase. It represents the Islamic tradition that has been deep-rooted in my country, Sudan, for a long, long time. Sudan is a very ancient civilization which has influenced Egyptian culture. It probably came into contact with China through traders, travellers and missionaries across the continents during the 10th century.</p> <p>I have seen a vase like this in Sudan, where it is used as a container for incense oil or perfume. Its Arabic inscription, a quote from the Quran, reads "Glory be to God". You would say this when you are amazed by the wonders of life. It is about being thankful all the time.</p>
Music	Shiekh Musa Nasr, performed by Abdul Hakeem

Participant	Nursen Bozyel
Favourite object	Blue and white wine jar, Yuen dynasty, about 1350
Creative label	<p>I love this wine jar. It is magnificent! Do you think its shape looks like a pregnant woman with a softly swelling belly tapering to the foot rim? Or does it remind you of a fat fellow who is cheerful, easy-going and always has a good appetite?</p> <p>During the 14th century, it was an expensive object</p>

	exported to Central Asia. Throughout history, its wealthy owners have treasured it so much that they would have its broken parts fixed. The metal ring was added when its mouth rim was chipped in the 15 th century, and the handles were restored 400 years later.
Music	General's Commander (Jianjun Ling), performed by Erhu

Participant	Hassan Cali
Favourite object	Blue and white brush pot with scholar pursuits, Qing dynasty, about 1700 - 1800
Creative label	<p>The decoration of this brush pot is an idealised representation of traditional Chinese scholars' leisure pursuits: one man is in deep thought; two are playing Go; a musician is playing a lute; and some are having tea in the quiet countryside. This shows a wise scholar should follow his heart and do what he wants.</p> <p>I like the decoration. It shows a happy springtime when flowers bloom everywhere and butterflies flit from leaf to leaf. I recall, in Somalia, wise men would sit on the ground playing Shax (a popular board game) while children ran around. What a nice afternoon!</p>
Music	Melody from a Bamboo House (, performed by Liu, Fang

Participant:	Ghania Gaoua
Favourite object	Blue and white drinking bottle, Ming dynasty, Zhengde period (1506-1521)
Creative label	<p>Don't miss this object! Its thick crescent shape looks like a pirate ship with two noisy pirates wearing metal pirate hats. The blue and white decoration is like an abstract painting of blue jeans and white paper. It is a porcelain version of Islamic leather or metal bottles, inspired by designs from Central Asia.</p> <p>It reminds me of my warm loving childhood in Algeria, where nomadic people drink from leather bottles like this. Have you seen cowboys in movies holding two ends of such a bottle and drinking water from the opening in the middle?</p>
Music clips	Bull Fight, performed by Doug Munro

Participant:	Abdi Jumale
Favourite object	Kettle and burner decorated in enamel, Qing dynasty, about 1700-1800
Creative label	<p>This set reminds me of hospitality and happiness. I have a similar one at home in Somalia, which was passed by my grandmother to me. My family always enjoys having guests and making tea with a set of kettle and burner like this. It would be a special treat after dinner. It recalls the days that we shared with friends and laughed together.</p>

	As trade flourished during the 10 th century, Chinese goods, such as porcelain, tea and silk, were exported to Somalia. I treasure owning a set like this and hope to pass it to my son.
Music clips	Boat song from the water village, performed by flute and pipa

Participant:	Lyna Kohut
Favourite object	Celadon bowl with peony sprays, Song dynasty (960-1279)
Creative label	<p>The hands of a master are cutting softly and carefully a peony pattern on a clay bowl. He is full of love for his work. It is the only thing he likes doing. He knows how to transform a mute, thick lump of clay into an exquisite, living body. It is akin to a graceful woman, who is an enigma even for him, her creator.</p> <p>With each cut he is carving her superb forms: slim and supple, thrilling and exciting. Its outward appearance may be that of an ordinary piece of pottery but....for him it is a beautiful stranger keening his imagination; she is his muse.</p>
Music clips	The Butterfly Lovers' Concerto: Transformation (Liangzhu's Concerto: Huadie), flute solo by Yu, Xunfa

Participant:	Diana Mehmeti
Favourite object	Milky white square vase, Qing dynasty, about 1700-1900
Creative label	<p>This vase doesn't have any pictures, but there is a character here. The stable square base shows a strong, independent and confident woman. Can you see how she is showing off with those big earrings? She is wearing a long dress decorated with lines of gold for traditional dancing. Imagine her dancing and spinning energetically in a meadow with white flowers and butterflies on a sunny day.</p> <p>This vase is about 250 years old but the milky white glaze is a copy of vases 900 years old. In the same way, this woman looks old but is young at heart.</p>
Music clips	Looking for Spring (Wang chunfeng), performed by Xiao, the bamboo flute

Participant	Emilia Militowska
Favourite object	Black tea ware with skeleton leaf design, Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279)
Creative label	<p>I am a black-glazed tea bowl. Sometimes I felt terribly lonely when nobody drank tea from me for ages. But since I have been here everything has changed. I have found my place. I am here for you.</p>

	<p>Many people look at me and see different things depending on their personality and mood. My yellow decoration reminds them of fire, a gigantic explosion. Then it's only disease, death, nothing - Apocalypsè. But...the yellow imprint is in a leaf shape. So, there is still hope for new life.</p> <p>What about you? What do you feel looking at me?</p>
Music	<p>Meditation No.2: Bamboo, performed by Ana Hernandez and Helena Marie</p>

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