

THE MEANING OF OBJECTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL TRANSITIONS: EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES¹

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Abstract

This study investigated the role that objects have in helping people adapt to a new environment. Fourteen Chinese postgraduate students were interviewed one semester after their arrival in New York City. The meanings they attached to objects, and how the meanings of objects changed during the students' adaption to their new environment are discussed. The discussion is placed in the context of person-object relationships and it is emphasized that objects can both reflect and actively affect an individual's feelings and emotion.

Introduction

Graumann (1974) indicated in his article: 'Psychology and the world of things' that if we 'try to think of any ten everyday human activities, which we prefer to call behaviors; then we soon find out that most of them are intimately related with everyday things: Getting up in the morning is getting up from a bed, being alarmed by a clock,...going through today's mail, reading, dictating letters...' (p. 390). 'It is precisely because human-object interaction is so common that it is generally taken for granted' (Riggins, 1985, p. 69) and under-researched by social scientists. The following review will focus on some of the literature which is relevant to the social-psychological meaning of objects in everyday life.

Psychoanalytic theory proposes the importance of the symbolic meaning of objects. But psychoanalytical theorists are not interested in the object itself because they see objects as the projection of psychosexual needs and conflicts, or the collective unconsciousness, and therefore the role of objects is passive and static.

By interviewing children in different cultures (in the U.S.A. and Israel), Furby (1978, 1980) claimed that both the meaning of and the motivation for possession depend on a sense of effectance. And through childrens' interactions with objects and

other people, they learn to identify objects as 'mine', 'yours' or 'theirs'; and to distinguish the 'me' and the 'not me'. Other approaches include the work by sociologists (e.g. Chapin, 1935; Laumann & House, 1970; Baudrillard, 1981; Amaturro *et al.*, 1987) who have studied the relationship between living room arrangements and people's social status, assuming that the living room reflects the individual's attempt to express a social identity. Other researchers are more interested in cherished objects and focus on different aspects of object meanings, such as their content, the modalities of experiencing meaning, and the intensity of the person-object relationship. Altman and his colleagues (Hansen & Altman, 1976; Vinsel *et al.*, 1980) did two empirical studies of the personalizations of students' rooms in college dormitories. They categorized personalization according to its content, such as 'personal relationships', 'values', abstract', 'reference', 'entertainment', and 'personal interest'. They found that students who subsequently dropped out of school were less satisfied with university life and that the decorations in their rooms showed less diversity and less commitment to the university setting.

In Oury's dissertation (1987),¹ high school and college students were asked to describe objects that had been especially important to them at some time in their lives from childhood to the present. Adopt-

ing Jungian concepts, Oury categorized the reasons for the importance of objects into those experienced through 'thinking', 'sensing', 'feeling', and 'intuiting'. She also discussed the relationships between the qualities of objects and the meanings that they carried.

Rubinstein (1989) studied how older people endowed the home environment with meanings. He described a person's engagement with objects as existing on a continuum ranging from 'accounting', 'personalization', 'extension', to 'embodiment'. As personal involvement intensified there was a decreasingly sharp gradation between person and object. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) interviewed 82 families in their own homes in the Chicago metropolitan area. The respondents were asked to name household objects they cherished. The authors then categorized object meanings based not just on their intrinsic qualities but the usage of objects, such as 'self', 'memories', 'experiences', and 'utilitarian'. They found that children tended to mention objects of 'action' (such as stereos), older people objects of 'contemplation' (such as photographs). Responses of female adults were similar to those of grandparents, while male adults' responses resembled those of the children. The authors also found that the emotional integration of the home was concretely embodied in household objects. These studies suggest that object meanings are related to people's commitment to their social and physical environment.

In the present study the dynamics of the transaction between persons and objects was studied as part of the process of adapting to a new environment for foreign students. For these students, going abroad may represent a subjective life stage (Stokols & Shumaker, 1982) and it automatically results in a change of social and environmental situations. Examining the experiences of foreign students provided the author with an opportunity to explore the object meanings for people in a transitional period in a particular life stage, so as to understand the dynamic nature of object meanings and the situatedness of object meanings in a social and environmental context.

Unlike most of the empirical studies of objects, the intent of this study is not to test some certain hypotheses. Instead of looking for correlations or causal relations between a few variables, my aim is to describe and to interpret the meanings held by the agents of their everyday world (Kockelmans, 1975; Christensen, 1982). In order to gather participants' experiences, in-depth interviewing was the method used.

Method

Participants

Because I am a Chinese student from Taiwan I opted to interview only students with similar background in order to reduce cross-cultural variation for both the participants and myself. Having been in a similar condition, I had an advantage of understanding their experiences. Participants were introduced to me by the presidents of the Chinese Student Associations in three universities in New York, two private and one public. No one refused to be interviewed. In total, seven men and seven women were interviewed. Their ages ranged from 23–28 years; all were single. This was their first time in the U.S.A.. They were all graduate students pursuing advanced degrees. They studied in seven different disciplines, including the social sciences, business, engineering, and fine arts. Only one student received financial aid from school.

As mentioned above there was no intent to achieve a statistical generalization from findings of this study, nor to test some hypotheses, so the group was not representative in a statistical sense at all. Instead, through a close analysis of a group of people with a durable size, it was expected to obtain a rich description of experiences from them.

Interview

In order to understand the changing nature of people's relations to objects in the adaptive process, in-depth interviews were employed as the central method for data collection. Interviews provided an opportunity for the participants to explore and clarify their experiences in a manner that a structured method such as a standardized questionnaire cannot. There was no pre-determined order or specified wording to the questions of interviews, but I did have a list of areas that I should cover in each interview. These areas included information about special objects—their meanings and usage, and about students' broader experiences—reasons for coming to New York for study, social relations, major concerns, and future plans. In the course of interviewing, the interviewees were encouraged to take the lead to a great extent, and the author followed their answers with a request for more information at an increasing level of depth.

Students were each interviewed one semester after their arrival in New York. All interviews were conducted in the students' places of residence so that I could see those objects mentioned by students

as well as their spatial contexts. All interviews were tape recorded except for one person who preferred to speak very slowly so that I could take extensive notes. The average time of an interview was about two hours. All interviews were conducted in Chinese. They were transcribed and then analyzed.

Analysis

The analysis used in this study was informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and the interpretive approach (Kockelmans, 1975; Christensen, 1982; Polkinghorne, 1989). I did not start with clearly preconceived hypotheses, but rather the study was based on only a general theoretical perspective of a phenomenon—a transactional approach (Wapner *et al.*, 1973; Altman & Rogoff, 1987). The specific concepts or categories of object meanings developed from previous studies (e.g. Vinsel *et al.*, 1980; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Oury, 1987; Rubinstein, 1989) enabled me to be more sensitive to the phenomenon (Kockelmans, 1975), but were not imposed on the data.

At first, I read the transcripts of the 14 interviews very carefully to get a sense of the whole. Then the meaning of every single object was coded and categorized in relation to the student's adaptation to the new environment. Objects for each student were then understood as a whole in the context of a student's broader life experiences. Comparisons among the 14 interviewees proceeded according to object meaning categories and other themes, such as social relations and future plans. Through a reciprocal process of understanding between the object experience and the broader life experience and between the individual case and the whole group, categories of object meanings were refined.

Although the meaning structure exhausts every single object's meaning in this study, it does not mean that this structure could be imposed on other situations. It would be expanded or revised in other studies with different samples and in different social and environmental contexts. However, this study does set an example of a way of comprehending and interpreting object experiences.

Findings and Discussions

Susanne Langer has said, 'Meaning has both a logical and psychological aspect' (Langer, 1957, p. 53). The meaning of objects is not dictated by the intrinsic qualities of the objects or the person's intentions *per se*. The object's intrinsic qualities lend certain

probable meanings to the object but it is the person in a particular cultural, social, and environmental context who perceives and assigns meanings to the object. Usually, one object is not restricted to a single meaning. On the contrary, people often assign different meanings to an object and thereby enrich its meaning. In the Chinese tradition a gift often has both a cultural meaning and a social function. A photograph could be a representation of absent others and a manifestation of a person's photographic skill. Each object's meanings are unique and rich so that it is impossible and inappropriate to develop a meaning category system according to an object's overall meanings and try to put an object's meaning in only one meaning category. It is the meaning structure which is important for understanding the scope and relations of those meanings. The themes described below represent the meaning dimensions of the meaning structure identified in this study. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive, rather they are overlapping. For instance, one person's *memory* is often the memory of an experience with *somebody*. So that a photograph usually reminds a person of her/his past experiences, manifests the friendship, and may become the basis for the initiation of a social conversation. In addition, an object's meanings might shift from some categories to other categories over time. For instance, an instrumental object could become an extension of memory after surviving a period of time, or become a manifestation of friendship through gift giving. In the following section I will describe the dimensions of the meaning structure (see Table 1) first, and then discuss changes of object meanings in a particular situation—environmental transition (see Table 2).

A meaning structure of objects

Objects of instrumental purposes. Every object has its function. A painting gives a room a more colorful look as does wallpaper. However, all utility is framed by a social and cultural context (Sahlins, 1976). Even our interactions with the most mundane

TABLE 1
A meaning structure of objects

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- (A) Objects for instrumental purposes
 - (B) Objects as an embodiment of values or ideals
 - (C) Objects as a manifestation of achievement
 - (D) Objects as an extension of memory
 - (E) Objects for deepening experience
 - (F) Objects for social exchange
 - (G) Objects as an extension of self
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objects in daily life operate within a symbolic field (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Clothes do not just keep people warm but may also communicate people's personality and social situation. So in some sense, every object has both functional and symbolic correlates. But students in this study rarely cherished a particular object because of its utilitarian purposes, unless it represented a person's past history or was comforting in some way. In this category, I include only those objects in which function constituted the major meaning. For instance, one student cherished a radio because she could practice her English comprehension by listening to it. She also cherished a sofa bed for its flexibility and comfort.

Objects as an embodiment of values or ideals. The object was described as an embodiment of cultural or personal values, ideals, or beliefs to improve the respondent's thinking, guide actions, or help make sense of life. Here, an object's meanings can be understood in both passive and active terms. On the one hand, the object projects a person's value. On the other hand, it actively influences a person's thinking. These two processes move back and forth constantly.

Religious books and mottos were most often mentioned primarily as a means of learning the wisdom and the meaning of life. One student liked to read Buddhist scriptures to reflect on her own conditions.

The world in Buddhist scripture is very deep. Buddha teaches us to look at our life from the end of it. Pleasure and pain is only a passing process... No one is perfect. You need to learn to forgive, to tolerate, to cultivate your moral character, to abandon self-centered thinking, and to appreciate other people. Every time I read Buddhist scripture I am in a peaceful mood... I would like to maintain a harmonious relationship with my classmates. I don't see them as opponents. Only if we teach each other what we know, can we learn.

Another woman liked a published diary of a Chinese student in Paris in the 1940s.

I have the same mood of being a foreign student as the author. When I read the book, it fosters my thinking. I think about my life, the surroundings, and the future of human beings. It is a time of introspection.

This book did not just help her express her feelings but made her think about her situation, her confrontation with a new culture, and the contemporary history of China.

One MBA student mentioned two special objects: a briefcase and his suits. He used them very often for presentations in school or for interviews with private companies. These objects represented his

idealized image of being a businessman in the future.

Another student learned from his parents:

I did not bring the pictures of my parents taken at the present time. I brought their wedding picture. They were very poor at that time. They had nothing. But now they can support me to study abroad. The story is very meaningful for me. The picture shows them standing on the earth in the countryside. It gives me much encouragement.

His parent made it possible for him to go to another country to study. They were more than just the persons that he was close to, but they provided a good model for him to emulate.

Objects as a manifestation of achievement. Objects could be a tangible mark of achievement, such as a transcript or an award, or the end product of a person's devotion of personal energy.

One urban design major brought some black and white photographs which he had taken in Taiwan. He selected those photographs with good composition rather than those with his family or friends in them. Sometimes he kept only one photograph from a roll of film. When he took new photographs he would study his techniques to see if his skill had improved. These photographs represented his achievement. He said those photographs were part of his 'self', the same as his architectural design works.

Objects as an extension of memory. Objects can give a tangible manifestation to the fleeting moments of joy and pain. They might represent a particular event: 'Invitation cards for our engagement remind me of that ceremony'; or life in a particular period of time: 'The experiences in graduate school are very important for me. This photograph is the epitome of the life in those two years. It easily makes me think a lot of things'.

There is of course no purely objective meaning of the past. People constantly select and reinterpret their past in relation to their present conditions. So the object does not just passively represent what happened in the past, but rather 'open[s] up the real towards the possible' (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 295).

A student reflected on his dairies:

Sometimes I read my old dairies. I find that all my thoughts followed what teachers had told me. I did not have my own opinion. I was too rigid. I cared about other people's opinions too much. But I do not want to destroy those dairies. Anyway, that was me at that time... The dairies are the record of a period of quite ignorant days. From reading these dairies I can understand other children much more. Now I do not intend to impose my own thinking on them because I was just as ignorant then as they are now.

He approached his past from an intellectual standpoint. Through the process, he enriched his conception of the world and had a deeper understanding of people and a deeper sense of self.

A woman brought photographs of 'the good old days':

I look at the photographs when I am in a bad mood. I think about the good old days. The story behind the photograph was filled with anger, happiness, and sadness. Then I think about the present situation. It is filled with anger, happiness, and sadness too. So I calm down.

'The good old days' represented in these photographs was not an objective reality. It reflected a personal judgement based on a standpoint in the present situation. Being immersed in a real and challenging world, this woman needed to face the pressure of schoolwork and the feeling of loneliness. The past without concrete personal involvement was idealized. But through a reflective comparison the idealization of the past was realized and the present became much more tolerable.

Objects for deepening experience. People get enjoyment or pleasure and express or transform their feelings and emotions through interacting with the object.

A woman cherished a tea set because she could have a warm and peaceful experience by drinking tea.

Drinking tea itself is a way of life. It makes me feel...I don't know. When I am drinking tea, I feel... I live in my inner world, a satisfied, harmonious world... Every time when I visit my friends, we make tea. We feel we are touching each other's heart. The experience imprints on our mind permanently. It is very easy to express our feelings and to talk.

Drinking tea by using a whole tea set is a much richer experience than simply pouring hot water over tea bags. Warming the teapot and pouring tea into small teacups are part of a delicate physical performance. By these movements and the ritual that occurs people cultivate themselves. A teapot is like a living creature. It needs to be cultivated too. Being constantly used and cared for, a teapot not only can keep the flavour of tea but also can be nurtured. When a person cultivates a habit of tea ritual, both the nature of the tea set and the self-identity of that person can be enhanced by the transaction. Drinking tea is a sharing experience as well. By taking teacups from a tea plate together and putting teacups back on it repeatedly, people are constantly drawn to a center—the tea set. A person is responsible for distributing tea to teacups.

S/he serves other people; they appreciate her/him. So drinking tea is not just to have tea. Rather it is a sharing and cultivating experience. This woman had cultivated her tea set for a long time. It stored her energy and care, and opened up a world for her.

She also mentioned a poem written by her friend. She kept it on the wall when she first arrived. The poem said: 'There is a person, just like a cloud, always drifting and wandering'. She felt that the poem expressed her present experiences and mood very poetically.

Another woman confronted a very difficult situation when she first arrived in New York. She faced the problem of finding housing, the stress of a qualifying examination, and the pressure of research work. Everything seemed to be difficult for her. A Christian motto on her small dining table comforted her. Although she was devoid of everything, she felt that God never left her.

When students were upset or in a bad mood, they talked to their friends, took a walk, watched television, or listened to music. These became ways of transferring their thinking or feelings out of their present conditions. But they could be distractions too. One student could not stop himself from watching television. For him, watching television was an escape from the weight and woes in the world. But it could not solve his problems. Finally, he gave his TV set to his friend.

Objects for social exchange. Objects, such as posters on the wall or photographs on display, can easily function as an initiator or a topic of social conversation. A student brought an album of travel pictures to the U.S.A. Those photographs were taken in 15 different countries. He said that it was very helpful for the development of social relations because everybody was interested in looking at them. While describing those photographs, he reminisced and shared his memorable experiences with his friends, and recounted the privilege of traveling in so many different countries.

Students often kept letters, gifts given by others, and photographs of their families or friends. These objects became tangible manifestations of their love and friendship with their significant others.

One student mentioned a cassette as a cherished object. Just a few days before he left Taiwan, his friends got together and everybody said something about their feelings for or their wishes to him. 'Some made jokes about me. Some referred to the words in the Bible. Some just sang a song. The atmosphere, their voices and laughs are still around me and give me a lot of lovely memories'.

One woman brought a sports shirt and a jade necklace given by her boyfriend. In Taiwan, she hung this sports shirt on the wall as decoration. After she came to the U.S.A., she wore it to bed when she missed him. The jade had a particular meaning for her because her mother did not support her relationship with her boyfriend, and this jade was given to her 'in front of her mother' just before she left. She wore it all the time. For her, the jade was the exteriorization of her boyfriend's love:

It attaches to my heart. It makes me not feel lonely... . When I just came here, everything was new and attractive. Gradually, the more people I knew the deeper my feelings of loneliness were. Although I have so many friends, no one really shares my feelings... . Only his love is sincere and faithful.

Objects as an extension of self. Although achievement, experiences, and social exchange are related to the self, in this category I refer to those objects which represent or express the 'core' self. Personal interest, memory, or achievement might touch only a slice of a person's life experience; the objects described below constitute a very important part of a person's life. Object experiences in this category are close to the process described by Rubinstein (1989) as embodiment in which the boundaries between self and object are blurred.

A woman cherished a stuffed cat:

A cat is very personal; it has its own self. A cat can find joy in its own way. It has a strong self-consciousness... . I can talk to her [the stuffed cat]; she can talk to me too. We have practiced conversation for so many years. In the past, when we talked to each other, I should think about what she would say or what I should say on behalf of her. Now I do not need to think. We can talk to each other very fluently... . She is like my child and myself too. It is difficult to say that kind of feeling. It has been a long time that we depend on each other. I feel she is alive... . Sometimes my mother tried to hide that cat but I did not let her do so. When I studied in high school my mother bought many other stuffed animals for me and asked me to exchange them for MM [name of the cat]. She suggested I wrap up MM and keep her in the cabinet because she was going to be broken. I refused. I took all the stuffed animals and they all became MM's pets.

This stuffed cat was inseparable from her. She kept the stuffed cat on her bed under a comforter. People could not see the cat, but she would show the cat to her close friends. Other friends might not see the stuffed cat, but most of them know that she liked cats and said that she was like a cat. She was happy about this. The cat was good company. They shared a lot of experiences, feeling, and ideals. She

transferred her feelings to the cat: 'When I first arrived, I was sorry for MM. I should not have brought her here. She was so lonely'. She projected her own dreams onto the cat: 'MM went to a ballet class'. The cat also played a significant role in her social world. Her family or friends sent gifts, such as a calendar with pictures of cats, to MM instead of her. MM also appeared constantly in her conversation with her friends. Once, when she bought grapes home, her boyfriend jokingly remarked that a grape was bigger than MM's ears. Since this stuffed cat constituted such a salient role in her life and was alive to her, would it supersede the importance of real people? One year after my interview she told me a lovely story:

In Taiwan, if I left home for a long period of time I carried MM with me. This summer I went back to Taiwan from New York. Of course I carried her [MM] with me. My boyfriend saw me off at the airport. We talked. He asked me if I could leave her to him. I was hesitant. We argued. Finally, he won. I took her out of my luggage.

This time the stuffed cat became her boyfriend's transitional object to cope with their separation.

Another man mentioned notebooks as his cherished objects. When I interviewed him, we moved from one sofa to another closer to the window because it was getting dark. He still carried his notebook with him. A notebook was with him all the time.

I bought this notebook in a Christian bookstore. There is a quotation from the Bible or other scriptures on the top of each page and a religious essay in the beginning of each month... . I write down my schedules and plans on it. I also keep notes about my feelings and thoughts while I am watching television or just walking in the street... . Sometimes I read my old notebooks. My stupidity and temper in the past make me reflective on myself.

These notebooks had the meanings of the Bible, a notebook, and a diary at the same time. He carried a notebook all the time, wrote down his plans, feelings and thoughts, and reflected on them. It organized his life, expressed his feelings, and reinforced his religious beliefs.

Changes of object meanings in environmental transitions

Environmental transitions result in new person-environment transactions. People leave objects behind, bring old objects to the new environment, and acquire new objects to make sense of their lives in the new place. The old objects' meanings might be strengthened or changed. For instance, photographs

TABLE 2

Changes of object meanings in environmental transitions

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- (A) New objects
 (B) Objects for maintaining continuity
 (a) Objects of personal history—
 Maintaining personal historical continuity
 (b) Objects as a bridge between the old and the
 new environment—
 Maintaining environmental continuity
 (c) Objects as the presence of the absent others—
 Maintaining social continuity
 (d) Objects as a place for release from the alien
 environment—
 Maintaining cultural continuity
 (C) Objects whose meanings have faded
 (D) Objects for communicating with the home environ-
 ment
-

of a friend might be more precious because of the separation; Chinese books might become a source of comfort instead of knowledge; functional objects brought from the home country might acquire new significance. The section to follow will discuss changes of object meanings for Chinese students in the U.S.A. (see Table 2).

New objects. One goes to a new environment with certain purposes in mind, whether these are vaguely formulated (e.g. having a new experience) or precisely formulated (e.g. getting a degree in a particular program). And one is continuously directed toward organizing her/his environment and endowing it with significance in order to execute and fulfil her/his plans (Wapner *et al.*, 1973). In this study, pursuing further academic knowledge and acquiring more cultural, social, and environmental experiences are the most frequently mentioned reasons for coming to the U.S.A.

A radio is a special object for one woman because she can practice her comprehension in English. Two students mentioned a new camera as a special object. They used the camera to record their new experiences and the new environment. One said:

I like photography. I brought a Nikon camera with a zoom. It is very expensive and heavy. I felt that it was unsafe to use it in the streets in New York. I bought a new small one. Henceforth, I had a new relation with the camera. I carried a camera with me only when I intended to take pictures before. But now, I carry the camera with me whenever I go out. I grasp more good opportunities and do more satisfactory photographic work.

People mentioned not only objects they had but objects they did not have as cherished objects. A pen was a special object for one student. He found the same kind of pen in Taiwan. It is a good pen made

in France but is very expensive. The pen has a black body with a white head. The pattern is like a mountain covered by snow. He liked it very much and because it was much cheaper in the U.S.A. he planned to buy it for himself as a graduation gift.

Objects for maintaining continuity. Environmental relocation of all kinds, whether displacement of low income families, job relocation, or going to a college from high school results in a disruption in one's on-going daily routines, social relationships, and an alteration of environmental orientation and person-object relations. Much evidence shows that people try to maintain continuity when they move from one residence to another, whether they are voluntarily or forcibly relocated. Replicating decorating practices and modifying the design of home (Lawrence, 1982; Gauvain *et al.*, 1983) as well as keeping old furniture, photos, or visual art to bring their memories with them (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981) represent the efforts most often mentioned to maintain continuity. Although 'for some individuals, relocation may represent an opportunity to begin a new life in a new setting; to disassociate with one's past' (Shumaker & Conti, 1985, p. 250), in this study most students did use objects to maintain their environmental, social, or cultural continuity.

Objects of personal history — maintaining historical continuity

'People look back...to acquire a sense of self and of identity... . To strengthen our sense of self the past needs to be rescued and made accessible' (Tuan 1977, pp. 186-187). Especially during such a dramatic environmental transition, students needed to define themselves. Objects representing bits and pieces of their past helped them to maintain their personal historical continuity. Diaries, photographs, music tapes, and stuffed animals were brought to the new environment to connect with one's past experiences, present conditions, and future expectations. One student brought a diary written recently because it described her feelings and expectations during the whole process of preparing for examinations and applying for schools. She constantly reviewed this diary and reflected on herself. While she confronted problems she also read this diary to see how she found solutions in similar situations in the past.

Objects as a bridge between the old and the new environment—maintaining environmental continuity

In addition to maintaining personal historical continuity, students tried to maintain their person-

physical environment relationship. So a photograph was not just brought to the new environment, students replicated its location in their rooms. A newly bought tea set reinforced a student's continuity with his past by its physical similarity to the old one.

'Extreme variations in physical environment experienced by a person may indeed threaten the self-identity of the individual. [To avoid threatening people's sense of self, they can] incorporate into the new setting those features of the old setting which reflect and support the place-identity characteristics of those residents' (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983, pp. 66-67). For the Chinese students, the old environment was incorporated into the new environment basically through the presence of old objects. These objects made the environmental change less drastic so that students could maintain their personal continuity, act in the new environment more easily and comfortably, and concentrate their attentions on a few key issues.

The rice and water that I brought to the U.S.A. from my country is an example from my own experience. Being in a foreign country, students encounter not only a new social and cultural environment but also a different natural environment. For Chinese, the major issue of acclimating oneself to a new natural environment is to prevent one's organic system from disagreeing with the food and water in a new environment. Blending the rice and water brought from the old environment with the rice and water which belonged to the new setting in my first meal was a ritual with multiple meanings for me. It gave me the feeling of being cared for and confidence about the new environment. Then, the home country was not only in my imagination or dreams but also inside my body.

A tea set in another transitional object mentioned by a student

I had one tea set in Tainan [a city in Taiwan], I bought another set when I studied in Taipei. I did not bring one here because it was too big. I was also afraid of breaking it. I thought that I could buy a new one in the United States. After I arrived here, I spent a lot of time looking for a tea set similar to the sets that I used in Taiwan... Drinking tea is always important for me, but this tea set is not so important for me now. Using another tea set would not make a difference.

Drinking tea was important for this student. It was a comfort and an environmental experience as well. When he encountered a new environment he found a tea set similar to his old one to bring out his past environmental experience. The tea set was not just transitional. It also represented continuity.

Every time he encountered a new environment he bought a similar tea set.

The rice and water and a tea set function as a bridge between the old environment and the new environment. One student mentioned that she intended to bring all her 'old stuff' in order not to be topsy-tervy when encountering a 'totally' new environment. When she wore her old clothes, put her old stationery, an old cassette player and an old cup on the desk, and displayed some old photographs on the wall, she felt that everything was going to be on track.

Students not only brought the 'old stuff' but made effort to replicate its location in the new immediate environment. Two students brought their girl friends' photographs and kept them in the same places as they did in Taiwan. Those photographs let them feel that their girl friends were still close to them. In addition, even their habitual body-environment relations could be maintained.

Objects as the presence of the absent others— Maintaining social continuity

In environmental relocation, some might encounter a new, possibly challenging, environment. For students who leave home and go to another country for study, the environmental transition is critical. Not only do they encounter a different social, cultural, climatic, and architectural environment, but they also face the problem of the 'distancing of the existing social support and nurture produced by families and close friends' (Fisher *et al.*, 1985, p. 181).

People used objects to deal with the separation from their significant others. Some students mentioned that they *grieved* while looking at photographs of their parents. Their feelings were similar to the grief for a lost home for the WestEnders. Fried (1972) has a good description: 'Their grief for a lost home seems to be one form of maintaining continuity on the basis of memories. While it prevents a more wholehearted adjustment to their altered lives, such adjustments would imply forsaking the remaining fragments of a continuity which was central to their conceptions of themselves and of the world' (p. 240).

Another related idea is objects as a 'comforter'. A woman cherished peanut candy not because she liked it but because it was brought from her home country. It was not significant for her at all in Taiwan but now it became a symbol of her connection with her mother and her own country.

My mother came to the United States before. She told me that Chinese students like to eat peanut candy very much. She suggested bringing some

peanut candy here for the Chinese students who helped me with my application. I brought twenty packages of peanut candy here. When I first arrived, I didn't give it to the Chinese students because I was not sure that they would like it. I ate some, but it killed my appetite later. In these two months I had many opportunities to give this candy to my friends, but I was reluctant to do that. The more I miss my family, the stronger the idea that I should keep the things brought from Taiwan. But I do not like to eat it any more. A few days ago I found it had passed the expiration date.

She also mentioned medicine and a sewing kit prepared by her mother. Although she had not used them, she had a warm feeling every time she saw them.

Because of the separation from their family or friends and the expectation that they would not see each other for a long time, foreign students have a good standpoint for 'reassessing' their relationship with their family and friends. One woman talked about the food cooked by herself which brought the experience of being so close to her mother.

I lived with my family all my life, but I was always busy at pursuing my own interests. I studied, prepared for the national examination, attended student clubs, spent time with my friends... . Actually I did not spend much time with my family... . Once I am married, I will be a *guest* when I go back to my home... . In the United States, I cook sometimes. I am surprised that the food tastes so similar to what was cooked by my mother. I feel that I am very close to her. I miss her very much.

Being conscious of the reality that she would not be able to live with her family for a long period of time again gave her an opportunity to step out of herself to think about her relationship with her family. She used to have a lot of conflicts with her mother. Now she realized that it was only because her mother had a different way of expressing her love. The longer she stayed in the U.S.A. the more she missed her family. She was no longer hesitant to express her feelings and to say that she loved them. And to her the food was a vivid proof that she would be her mother's daughter forever.

To maintain continuity does not necessarily imply 'a rigid refusal to alter practice or structure' or an indifference to current activities and social relationships, but rather 'suggest[s] development and growth within a coherent historical context' (Jacobi & Stokols, 1983, p.162). Thus, the objects that people carry from one place to another not only provide them with a sense of continuity but also allow them to organize and to explore the new environment.

Students brought to the new environment photographs or gifts which are connected with their

families and friends. Correspondingly, they left behind some objects with their families and friends. One student talked about the objects she left behind:

I have the habit of wearing a necklace. Just before I came to the United States, my mother gave me a necklace as my birthday present. I brought it here and wear it everyday... I had three necklaces in Taiwan. I used to wear them alternately. I left them with my mother and sisters intentionally. I also left some pictures of myself with them.

The birthday present necklace that she brought here, as well as the necklaces and photographs that she left behind, established the presence of one's significant other both for her and for her family.

Objects as a place of release from the alien environment—Maintaining cultural continuity

Being in a foreign culture and among people from different countries students might treasure the objects which belong to Chinese culture much more.

One man described the meaning of Chinese books as a comforter: 'I read these [Chinese] books not in order to get new knowledge but to soothe and comfort my feelings. Business books make me feel fatigued. They are not intimate to me. So I need to read Chinese books'.

Another man described his enjoyment when reading a Chinese newspaper:

It is a 'high level' enjoyment. Lying down on my bed with a bottle of beer at hand, I can read a newspaper for about two hours each time... I can read it from the first page to the last page... The aim of reading a newspaper in Taiwan was to get a sense of what's happening, that's all. The situation here is totally different. It's also different from reading an English textbook. I don't need to look up a word in a dictionary when reading a Chinese newspaper. I am totally relaxed. I seek pleasure to my heart's content. It's really an enjoyment.

He mentioned that reading a Chinese newspaper was different from reading a newspaper in Taiwan and reading an English textbook. He also mentioned that he had difficulty in school work and people were not friendly. Because of the separation, reading a Chinese newspaper was the major source of getting news about his own country. The loss of his competence in communication affected his performance in school and his social relations with other people in this new environment, therefore, in reading Chinese newspapers and magazines, he retrieved his sense of competence and self confirmation. By withdrawing from the unfriendly and challenging world, he could achieve something and be 'himself'.

Although Chinese books or music were significant for some students to maintain their cultural continuity, some tried to avoid encountering some objects just because of the significance of these objects. The meaning of these objects was too overwhelming for students to bear. One woman brought her favorite music cassettes but she tried not to use them. She described her experience of listening to Chinese music:

I brought some cassettes of Chinese music that I liked. As Chinese poems, the music is very Chinese and traditional.... I am adapted to this environment pretty well. I have some friends without deep relationships. At least, I usually don't feel lonely. But when I listen to the Chinese music I miss the past very much. I strongly feel that I am different from other students. I think about my being Chinese, my present situation, and the time ahead that I must spend here. I am afraid of touching that kind of feeling. I don't know how to describe the feeling. Maybe I am afraid of making my nostalgic feeling more serious. I guess that there is a contradiction in my heart. Usually I feel that I live very well, but while I am listening to Chinese music I find that actually I am very lonely. I don't want to touch this feeling.

She saw Chinese music was a kind of condensation of Chinese culture. It could easily arouse in people the image of an ideal life style of the ancient Chinese—a peaceful, friendly, contented, and undisturbed way of life. She did not belong to the American culture and was always a foreign student. Her family and friends were so far away. The noise and crowding in New York reinforced her feeling of loneliness. But she was busy at school work and other activities so that she did not think about this problem. When she listened to Chinese music, it brought out in her consciousness the recognition that she was not actually integrated into this society. This nostalgic feeling was not constructive for her life. Thus, she tried to avoid listening to Chinese music.

In the above section, I described the objects that students brought to the U.S.A. for maintaining their personal continuity. However, some students left objects behind in their home country to maintain continuity. One student mentioned that she would not bring all her precious objects here. If she did that, it meant that she would never go back to Taiwan again. For her, coming here for study was a temporary thing. The permanent home was in her own country. Those objects left behind at her home represented the place waiting for her to return.

Objects whose meanings have faded

While encountering a new environment, students cherished some new objects and used other objects

to maintain personal continuity. As life went on, different new object meanings might emerge and some other object meanings might fade into the background. It does not mean that those meanings are diminished forever, rather they might come out again depending on their larger life experiences.

One student cherished a new set of flutes for a short period of time, later he preferred to focus his energy on other things.

I played flute everyday in Taiwan. After I came here I found that flutes in New York are better and cheaper, so I bought a whole set of flutes. When I just bought these flutes, I played for fifteen minutes everyday after coming back from school. Later I was not so excited. There were so many novel and interesting things outside. I felt that it was wasting time to sit down and play the flute. But I would feel very uncomfortable if I could not play it at all. I should be able to decide to play or not to play by myself.

Another interviewee has a similar experience. He loved classical music. He brought some special cassettes. When he first arrived, he listened to the music very often. Later, he tended to listen to the radio to know more about American music, and the meaning of the music cassettes he brought here faded into the background of his life.

Objects for communicating with the home environment. Students did not just bring old objects or buy new objects. They also exchanged objects with the people in the old environment. Telephoning or sending a letter was the most common way students communicated with their families or friends. They often included pictures in a letter to describe what they had seen and heard.

One woman loved music. She had received more than 60 music cassettes from her family.

I love music. I had many music records in Taiwan. My family recorded a lot of music and sent the cassettes to me without my asking. The music was selected as flute series, wind and string series, etc. by my family. They know what music I liked. I use these music tapes often. Very, very, very often.

She could buy those classic music cassettes in New York easily. But the postage costs of the cassettes that her family sent to her exceeded their monetary value. In addition to these cassettes, even some food, clothes, and a quilt were sent by her family and when she needed something she just made a phone call. Her family members liked to do things for her because they enjoyed giving and receiving and the sent objects were the carrier of her family's continuous love.

Her family and friends also sent photographs to her. She put these photographs on her desk without

frames and changed them everyday because photographs rolled up when exposed to the dry weather. She took them down and pressed them, then, put other photographs on display so that she could enjoy looking at them everyday.

Conclusion

The meaning of objects has been widely studied in different disciplines, such as anthropology, history, and cultural studies. Objects have been recognized as an integral part of the social system (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984; Appadurai, 1986). But in this literature researchers focus on the group or societal level of object meanings without an attempt to examine experiences at the individual level. The purpose of the present study was to understand person-object relations in everyday life at the experiential level.

The participants in this study were all Chinese students from Taiwan who came to the U.S.A. to study for the first time. They represented a particular group of people with a specific age range, social status, and cultural background. Although the findings could shed light on the experiences of other groups of people, there was no attempt to see the participants as the representative of all people. Because of the specific characteristics of the participants, their experiences were different from those described in other empirical studies. Here I will compare the findings with existing literature through the content of object meanings. Later, I will discuss the theoretical aspects of person-object relations in this study.

The participants in this study consisted of Chinese students in the U.S.A. Their profession was 'student'. Most students did not previously have the experience of traveling to another country. Although all the males spent about two years in the army, and some students had the experience of living in a dormitory away from home, they could still go home in three or four hours when they had the need. So this was the first time they had been separated from their families and close friends over such a long distance. Their homes were no longer easily within their reach because going home would mean spending about \$1000 and travelling for 20 h. For some students, this was the first time they had not lived with their parents. It was also the first time they confronted such a drastic environmental change—language and culture. Without access to social support and nurturance from their families or close friends, loneliness or helplessness became a

big issue for them. One student told me that 'foreign students are not alone, but lonely'. Another student appreciated me for interviewing her because she felt that she was talking with her friends in Taiwan. According to the findings, objects connected with their social relations constituted a large portion of the cherished objects mentioned by the participants. These objects—such as photographs, letters, gifts, and tapes—functioned so as to 'establish the presence of their absent significant others' or as 'a bridge between the new and the old environment', and helped them to maintain their self identity.

Sociologists often conceptualize objects as symbols of people's social status (e.g. Chapin, 1935; Laumann & House, 1970; Amaturio *et al.*, 1987). For the participants in the present study, objects were rarely cherished as symbols of social status. There was but one exception involving a student who mentioned a briefcase and his suits as an image of his future career. In this study, all the participants were graduate students. In some sense, their status was fixed as a student and in addition, almost all the student were financially supported by their parents so that having objects with a high monetary value or a particular style would not be a thing to be proud of. The students' major concern was school work. One student mentioned that he would not decorate his room as he did in Taiwan. It would be too fancy and he would feel guilty because a foreign student's life should be simple and diligent. But on the other hand, if most of the students were concerned about their schoolwork and future careers, why were objects directly connected with school or their careers so rarely mentioned? Instead, they used objects as comforters to deal with the stress of schoolwork or social relations, or used objects as an anchor point to pursue other new experiences in the new setting. One speculation is that their futures were still tenuous for them since they have just started their new studies. These futures depended upon how well they could handle their schoolwork and adapt to their new environment. In Altman's and his colleagues' studies (Hansen & Altman, 1976; Vinsel *et al.*, 1980), it was found that decorations in the rooms of those students who subsequently dropped out of school showed less diversity and less commitment to the university setting. My interpretation of Altman *et al.*'s studies is that they consider objects reflecting attachment to the students' hometown as a manifestation or reinforcement of their failure to adjust to the new setting. The problem of these studies is that they leave out the respondents' intentions and interpretations in the process of personalization and simplify the

person-object relation. The findings in the present study show clearly that objects reflecting attachment to a students' home country can be a place for withdrawal, a comforter, or an anchor point for searching for new experiences.

Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton (1981) found that children tended to cherish objects of 'action' (such as stereos), and older people preferred objects of 'contemplation' (such as photographs). In comparison to their findings, the major dimensions of object meanings for students identified in the present study, such as manifestation of connections with others and an extension of memory, are closer to those of older people. One plausible reason is that family ties are highly valued in Chinese culture. The second reason, as mentioned above, has to do with separation and the drastic transition in the context of the students' lives.

In conclusion, the meaning of objects is derived from the interaction between the intrinsic qualities of objects and the person in a larger social-environmental context. Meaning changes as people's lives evolve. In the existing literature, except for some developmental studies (Winnicott, 1971; Furby, 1978, 1980; Oury, 1987) which deal with the development of the child's concept of self in relation to its interaction with objects, most researchers discuss the multiple meanings of objects while assuming that once an object gets its meaning, the meaning remains the same. The present study clearly shows the changing nature of object meanings as in the case of transitional objects, objects whose meanings have faded into background, and functional objects acquiring new social meaning in environmental transition.

Time is a constituent feature of object meanings. Meaning is not only undergoing change but people find meaning in the temporal character of human existence because human beings are fundamentally temporal (Heidegger, 1962). '[T]he 'meaning' of the past work is defined in terms of the question put to it from the present...the questions we ask are ordered by the way we project ourselves in understanding into the future' (Palmer, 1969, p. 182). So a person's '[p]ast memories, present experiences, and future dreams are inextricably linked to the objects that comprise his or her environment' (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). A diary recorded a person's past history and enriched his conception of the world. A stuffed cat preserved a person's memory, was a constant companion, and was a projection of her future dreams. Food brought out a person's connection with her mother and triggered her reassessment of her relationship with her home environment.

The descriptions above also show the reciprocity between persons and objects as a characteristic of person-object relationships. The role of objects is not static and passive. Objects are not just the projection of people's needs. They actively affect people's feelings and thinking. A photograph or letter brought people back to their past, but people constantly selected and reinterpreted their past. A music cassette could both reflect and affect a person's feelings and emotion.

In the field of environmental psychology, person-in-environment has been proposed for many years as a unit of analysis from a transactional perspective (e.g. Wapner *et al.*, 1973; Altman & Rogoff, 1987). In the present study, although only the experiences of a small group of foreign students in the U.S.A. were studied, the discussions of person-object relationship—multiple meanings of an object, the changing nature of objects' meanings, the situatedness of objects' meanings in an environmental and temporal context, and the reciprocity between a person and an object—provides empirical evidence of a transactional perspective.

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Notes

(1) Oury, M. A. (1987). *Special objects: a study of the meanings of things*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. The City University of New York.

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