

Prehistoric Material Culture

Presenting, Commemorating, Politicising

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The only past we can know is the one we shape by the questions we ask, and these questions are moulded by the social context we come from. Discourses about the past shape our understanding of the present, and different pre-histories may serve conflicting ideological ends. The past is an effective tool for influential actors to foster new or legitimate political conditions and power relations, or to reinforce such existing conditions and relations. Therefore, perceptions of the past often change when new regimes and power relations are coming into existence and embarking on creating new presents.

Politicising or manipulation of the past to gain political control of the construction of present realities is carried out by activating collective processes of “remembering” and “forgetting”. In the Freudian model of the mind, all memories are potentially intact, and forgetting is never really about loss but merely distortion. Forgetfulness becomes essentially a *failure* of re-

membering. The predominant view of the relationship between material culture and processes of remembering and forgetting sees objects as supplements or substitutes for memory. Memory is a reproduction or copy of an original event or experience, and mementoes such as material monuments are mere copies of copies. But perceiving material culture as a supplement or substitute is far too simplistic. Memory can be envisaged without such substitutes and, rather than acting as a supplement to our memory, materiality fulfils a basic lack in our experiences. The relationship between remembering and forgetting is not a linear process; it is a struggle or a tension between what is present and what is absent. Material culture shoulders a large responsibility for our personal and collective memory, and materialisation or dematerialisation of events can act to forge memory or to facilitate forgetting. Material culture not only recalls memories, it also *produces* them (Buchli and Lucas 2001:79-80).

Through preservation, reconstruction and presentation of prehistoric material culture like artefacts, monuments and cultural landscapes, selected aspects of the past are commemorated, revitalised and repossessed or hidden, forgotten and temporarily lost. A forgotten past is erased as a possible space from which to view the present critically (Dirlik 1996:248), and it is therefore useful in politics: “the major focus [of commemoration] is not the past ... but serious matters in the present” (Bodnar 1992:15). Important questions are: Whom do memory and forgetting serve? Who controls a society’s perceptions of the past and understandings of the present? Where does the cessation of striving for archaeological knowledge end and the suppression of information begin? How are changes in archaeological reasoning connected with changes in political and ideological structures? And what are the consequences of these connections for public presentation and commemoration of archaeological monuments? In this article I shall enquire into some aspects of these questions and the ideological and political significance of prehistoric, material culture.

Politicised presentation and commemoration of material culture

Archaeological work unfolds in successive stages. Firstly, it is the excitement of discovery, followed by excavation and later by academic work of analysis and interpretation. Secondly, it is (hopefully) the creation of a site for presentation and for the public to come and visit, in the form of a museum or a reconstruction or arrangement of a monument. In both stages, archaeology is vulnerable to pressures emanating from its political and ideological surroundings.

The insight that archaeological research is shaped by the contemporary social context is not new, but, despite much post-processualist debate on the subject, it has not been applied in a thorough way in research strategies (Härke 1998:19). Interpretations of prehistoric events are often influenced by factors having more to do with the present, and an extreme example is Nazi archaeology and the intimate link between its attitude towards migrations and the contemporary political context. The scholarly foundations for the idea of prehistoric migrations were laid in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. One predominant view of migration at the time was the assumption that European civilisation had originated in the north and was spread southward by repeated movements of the “Nordic race”.

In the 1930s, the Nazis adapted this view for their ideological purposes. The political leaders dictated archaeological attitudes and explanations of prehistoric migrations, and the idea of the adventurous, prehistoric, migrating German came to represent a symbol of German superiority. There was an obvious connection between migration and the Nazi political agenda. The cultural superiority of the German race was supposedly demonstrated by the Nordic, Aryan origin of civilisation. The spread of this civilisation by the migration of people confirmed two key notions of Nazi ideology: “the genetic basis of culture in the ‘blood’ of peoples and the heroic image of Germany and Germans as *Kulturträger*, ‘bearers’ and distributors of culture” (ibid:22).

The political use of archaeological monuments in South Africa is another example of the intimate relationship between archaeology and the contemporary, ideological context. After the democratic election of government in South Africa in 1994, the official list of recognised heritage sites was re-addressed. The state agency for heritage management, the National Monuments Council (NMC), had to change the imbalance in the list of heritage sites declared as National Monuments in terms of the National Monuments Act of 1969. The former list was heavily criticised for neglecting heritage sites representing the prehistory of the indigenous people and thereby neglecting the preservation of historical memories of relevance to the majority of South Africans. Many of the recently declared National Monuments have therefore a markedly different character from those declared during the colonial and apartheid eras. In re-addressing the imbalance of the list there was a tendency to commemorate the heritage of symbols that promote the concept of a new South African identity and nation. The emphasis was put on contemporary rather than on ancient sites that are often expressions of the recent political change. There has been a shift in the criteria for conservation towards the recognition of sites associated with important events or people, but which have little aesthetic value (Hart and Winter 2001). The practice of heritage management and interpretation, preservation and presentation of material-cultural traits, gives us a valuable archaeological record reflecting changes in political ideologies in this century.

Paradigm and power

The close connection between, on the one hand, the development of archaeology as an academic discipline and research tradition, and, on the other hand, political and ideological conditions is the outset for discourses about the past and for the politicising of prehistory. This connection can be analysed through “power-paradigm” relations.

The relationship between paradigms and control over intellectual work, or between paradigms and power, is an aspect that is rarely discussed in connection with paradigms and “paradigm crisis” (Dirlik 1996.:244). The concept of paradigm was introduced by Kuhn in his seminal work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1962. It first entered the study of the development of natural science and later the development of the social sciences and the humanities. Paradigms refer to scientific achievements that are “Sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity, [and] sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve” (Kuhn 1962:10).

The relationship between paradigms and scientific communities is, following Kuhn, circular. A paradigm defines the community, and the community pursues the paradigm. Some examples of scientific practice serve as models for coherent scientific traditions. Research based on shared paradigms is committed to the same scientific rules and standards. Successive paradigms have substantive differences. They tell us different things about the population of the universe and about that population’s behaviour. Paradigms are the source of the methods, problem fields and standards of solutions accepted by any mature scientific community at any given time. A new paradigm often necessitates a redefinition of the corresponding science (Kuhn 1962:102).

The power of the paradigm is the power that the scientific community holds over the individual scientist. Paradigms are therefore not just models of explanation based on the same scientific rules and standards. They are also expressions of social ideologies within scientific institutions. While Kuhn accounted for the relationship between paradigm and power, he did not account for the relationship between *power* and *paradigm*: the larger social formation on the one hand, and the community of scientists, on the other (Dirlik 1996). Since cultural and ideological institutions cannot be isolated from the broader social context, paradigms also represent ideological and cultural attitudes and social ideas within

the broader context of social relations. Paradigmatic supremacy represents ideological supremacy that expresses power relations within a context of social relations and ideologies (ibid:244). The kinds of problems that scientific communities pursue are subject to extrascientific considerations. And the power relation between politics and science is much more conspicuous for the historian than for the natural scientist.

Educational, cultural and ideological institutions are crucial arenas for the reproduction of power relations. These institutions are, according to Bourdieu (1977), fields of conflict in which groups seek to gain and maintain positions in social hierarchies. Schools and universities have central roles in transmitting and legitimating power privilege in a symbiotic relation with the state and hence with political conditions. When power institutions are established as taken-for-granted and become self-regulative, the position of the élite stabilises. In the process of gaining this position, the institutions are arenas for social struggles aiming to control understandings of the present, perceptions of the past and contents of social ideas (ibid:190).

Power and paradigm – a Chinese example

China has witnessed four radical, political transitions in the twentieth century: (1) from empire to republic, (2) from republic to the nationalistic regime of Chiang Kai-shek, (3) from the Chiang Kai-shek Nationalist to the Mao-Zedong Communist regime, and (4) from Maoist Communism to the contemporary, post-Mao society (Hjellum 1995). Throughout the social struggles following these transitions, the relationships between power and paradigm, between the larger social formation and the community of scientists and between educational institutions and the state are evident. As shown below, major shifts in the Chinese research tradition and agenda succeed the two latest transitions in political, power relations.

After the transition from the Chiang Kai-shek Nationalist to the Mao-Zedong Communist regime and the founding of the

PRC (People's Republic of China) in 1949, Marxism-Leninism-Maoism became the conceptual framework for the study of Chinese society. Under the leadership of Mao, many academic disciplines were condemned as bourgeois subjects and their practitioners as reactionary tools of imperialism. Scientists were victims of major constraints on intellectual freedom and several academic departments and institutes were closed down (Stockman 2000). The banning of academic disciplines was part of the attempted revolutionary transformation of Chinese culture. Culture is, according to a Marxist interpretation, the expression of the dominant class. Consequently, the educational and cultural institutions had to be transformed to prevent them from reproducing the power of the dominant class. The elimination of the cultural hegemony of the ruling classes was required if power was to be transferred to the masses of working people (ibid:12).

At the same time, archaeology saw several, and in some respects positive, developments. Numerous discoveries were made, significant research was carried out and many achievements were evident, compared with the period prior to 1949. Archaeological excavations expanded into every corner of the country, new excavation techniques were adopted, several new archaeological museums and institutes were established, and archaeological literature gained better publication conditions. In addition, a strict antiquity law prohibited the export of antiquities and prevented loss of antiquities and ancient remains (Tong 1995:177).

The emergence of modern archaeology in western countries can be seen as based on four major developments (Fagan 1994:15-16): (1) the invention of scientific excavation techniques, (2) the use of multidisciplinary approaches to the study of relationships between people and their environment, (3) the increasing impact of natural science, and (4) the refinement of archaeological theory. Despite the fact that Chinese archaeology underwent many similar developments, Maoist dogmatism caused a theoretical setback in China, compared with the theoretical and method-

ological debates that characterised much of western archaeology at the time (Nelson 1995:4-7).



Ill. 1: Mao Zedong (1893-1976) was the leader of the People's Republic of China and first secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from 1943 until his death.

A new Marxist-Maoist paradigm was defined in archaeology. It is difficult to gain an exact picture of what constituted this paradigm. Chinese archaeologists did not use the developments in Marxist archaeology made in foreign countries, and often they did not acknowledge the necessity of discussing theoretical questions or introducing foreign theoretical advancements. Therefore, the

picture of the paradigm must be drawn basically from examining certain objective pronouncements of some authoritative scholars (Tong 1995:179-180), and the unilinear, evolutionary theory is an important component in these works.

Archaeological research was dominated by dogmatic Marxist theories about the development of human societies, but the use of the unilinear, evolutionary theory in China bears only a superficial resemblance to the western, evolutionist paradigm (*ibid*). As in western evolutionist accounts of change, human prehistory was comprehended as unfolded in predictable ways along a unilinear sequence from primitive band groups through matrilineal clan to patrilinear clan. Matriarchal tribes would inevitably turn into patriarchal clans and ancient slave states would be followed by feudal society. This pattern was treated as inevitable and self-evident and required no explanation. What needed explanation was any deviation from the pattern (Nelson 1995:4).

As more and more data accumulated from excavations all over the world, archaeologists realized that they were dealing with very complex problems of cultural change over very long periods of time. Western evolutionism developed a great concern for the transitions between stages, and the causes of movement from one stage to the next, as well as discussing both the necessary and incidental characteristics of each level. In China, on the other hand, the differences between the cultural, evolutionary levels and the processes of change were theoretically little developed (*ibid*). This can be explained as a consequence of the political context. The aim of the study of archaeology was to prove a centralist historical development and strengthen the national unity, and new discoveries were explained by the Marxist, social-developmental theory (Lary 1996:13; Tong 1995:181). During the transition from Maoist Communism to the contemporary, post-Mao society, Chinese archaeology has undergone a new, paradigmatic change. The academic disciplines have been liberated and new methods and theoretical approaches have been introduced. One aspect of the latest paradigmatic change is a new, regionalist model of

interpretation. This model stands in opposition to the centralist model; it empowers the outlying provinces and acknowledges that regional history must provide the basis for regional pride and regional sense of identity. Various parts of China played crucial and mutually interdependent roles in creating the foundation for Chinese civilization (Falkenhausen 1995:198-200).



Ill. 2.: “The Masses Make History”. This picture is one of several created by imprisoned fighters and supporters of the Communist Party of Peru. Many of the artists were killed in the prison massacres of June 1986 and September 1992.

Politicised, public presentation of material culture in China

The regionalist model of interpretation in China is founded on ideological and political changes, and its consequences are visible in the public presentation and commemoration of prehistoric materiality. During the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards

incited by Mao destroyed numerous, valuable, cultural relics and antiquities. This de-materialisation of material culture may be understood as part of an attempt to “reverse history” and diminish the accomplishments of imperialism and the higher social strata. Archaeologists had to pay special attention to the history of the labouring people who constituted the majority of the population. Emphasising the contribution of this class in history contributed to undermining the élite by ignoring them as the product of the exploiting class (Tong 1995:182). Selected aspects of the past were commemorated, whereas other aspects were hidden to promote the Communist ideology.

One aspect of China’s transition to contemporary, post-Mao society is a decreasing confidence in the Communist ideology. This ideological change effects the perceptions of Chinese pre-history and the manner of display of archaeological monuments to the public. Historical events earlier deemed regressive are now being re-evaluated and re-interpreted. Imperial history is often re-interpreted as a motive force in Chinese modernisation (Tong 1995:182), and China’s feudal past is revitalised after being undermined by Maoist historical narratives (Anagnost 1994:231).

The present restoration and the public representation of archaeological monuments have several objectives. China’s past is being rediscovered in the context of an emerging market economy. The result is widespread efforts to quickly, and in some cases inaccurately, restore cultural sites for commercial purposes. Tourism represents a significant opportunity for economic growth, and the “heritage industry” is a notable part of the tourist opportunity. The display of archaeological sites is being commercialised, and the heritage is becoming part of the entertainment industry. Tradition becomes a commodity that is channelled to promote internal tourism and foreign investment (Potter 1997:147; see also Anagnost 1994:231). Simultaneously, the restoration of monuments can be seen as governed by political attempts to legitimate new power relations and ideological conditions (Lary 1996). Chinese capitalism has abandoned the idea of the national economy as an autonomous unit and

proclaims instead the necessity of internationalisation and globalisation as a condition for development. This has resulted in a new regional consciousness (Dirlik 1996:251-253).

The new, regionalist model of interpretation of the past is evident in public presentations of archaeological monuments. In 1983, the tomb of Zhao Mei, the second king of Nanyue, was discovered in what is today the city of Guangzhou in southeastern China (Lary 1996). The kingdom of Nanyue was established in 203 B.C. and held power in Lingnan for almost one hundred years. The kingdom is known from the earliest writing of history in China, but details of its history known from historical records were sparse and archaeological discoveries have added a great deal of information on its society. The king's tomb sets the centre of the Nanyue kingdom. The discovery of the tomb was a major happening, because for a long time the tomb of the Nanyue king had been searched for. The tomb was intact, and the excavation revealed treasures such as a jade burial suit and a range of bronze objects such as cups, beakers and tools. In the innermost chamber of the tomb the king's gold seal was found; a final "proof" that this was the tomb of the second Nanyue king. Soon after the discovery of the tomb, the construction of a museum was started near the tomb where the Great North Gate of Guangzhou once stood (*ibid*). The present archaeological works on Nanyue show that archaeology can prove important points about the origins of peoples. The focus in Nanyue archaeology on the glories of the indigenous peoples of Lingnan, the earliest precursors of the area, is a consequence of the new, regional identity. The effort to make the discoveries in Nanyue available to the public has been object of massive official interest and support. The site is sponsored at the highest level of regional officialdom.

There has been no consideration of the cost or the loss of prime land in a city dedicated to commerce. The site has enormous cultural significance, because it confirms Lingnan's distant and glorious past. By the feeling of pride in the kingdom of Nanyue, time is truncated and the past is made to seem very close to the present. Two thousand years of history are brought

together in a way that makes both ends of this history identify with each other completely (Lary 1996).



Ill. 3. The extension of the Shang dynasty.

The new regional consciousness is also visible in the changed attitude towards the archaeological remains from the Chinese Bronze Age. The legendary “Three Dynasties” of the Bronze Age, the Xia, Shang and Zhou civilizations in ancient North China, date from approximately 2200 to 500 BC. They were characterised by a high degree of cultural and geographical homogeneity and continuity, with one dynasty succeeding another. Archaeologists working on the Bronze Age in southern

China no longer hesitate to acknowledge local, archaeological remains that do not parallel with the remains from the centres of the “Three Dynasties”, traditionally comprehended as the cradle of Chinese dynastic civilisation. Today, northern dynastic influence is not described as decisive for local cultural developments in the south (Falkenhausen 1995).

Towards reflexive presentations in archaeology

As social researchers, archaeologists have a responsibility to critically examine how their research is related to contemporary political agenda and to illuminate other realities, rather than merely reflecting and being the ideological means and tools of the present society. There is a fine line between striving for knowledge and searching for confirmation of social convictions. Archaeology is very accessible and therefore an ideal academic discipline to foster popular enthusiasm, and the construction of physical sites as visible proof of prehistoric events must be executed according to a reflexive theoretical stance.

Interpreting archaeology is a subjective matter, and the meaning of material things is indeterminate and problematic. Reflexivity can be defined as *thinking about one's own thinking* and is a crucial concept in the theoretical discourse about the researcher's own self-consciousness when facing the archaeological record. The researcher is part of the researched and can even be seen as creating his or her subject. Production of archaeological knowledge must hence be acknowledged as a meaningful creative activity, and reflexivity involves a critical stance to the researcher's own role in the archaeological process (Ehn & Klein 1994). Reflexivity “obliges one to engage in a personal archaeology of intellectual (and other) influences” (Wakeman 1998:165). Being reflexive is a practice whereby one questions one's own prejudices, culture and consciousness. The pre-conditions for reflexivity in archaeology are confrontations with the unknown or “the Other”. Accepting the distance and the difference between the past and

the present is a necessary precondition for being reflexive in archaeology (Kyvik 2002a, 2002b, 2002c).

It is imperative to use modern concepts when we confront the past. As long as we reason by analogy, the present will help us to see past complexity and the past will help us to understand ourselves. “We must never forget to watch ourselves, knowing the otherness of the past” (Bynum 1995:31), because “at stake is not just our claim to carry out unbiased research and to engage in open-minded, unprejudiced debate but also our claim not to provide direct support for partisan political positions and our desire to be free in our work from political interference and pressure” (Härke 1998:24).

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