



## Critique and Reflection of Chinese Paleolithic Archaeology in the Perspective of Material Culture Studies

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### Abstract

In recent decades, postmodernism has been on the rise, and scholars are no longer satisfied with the descriptive study of “things”, and the study of material culture centered on human beings is gaining more and more attention. Archaeology is an important part of material culture research, but its research object is limited by various objective conditions, and its research method is still object-oriented, failing to reveal the subjectivity of human beings well. Therefore, it is necessary to re-examine the relationship between archaeology and material culture research. This paper takes the paradigm of material culture research as the starting point and the “entanglement theory” as the perspective to review and reflect on the current situation of Chinese Paleolithic archaeology.

**Key words:** Material culture studies; Paleolithic archaeology in China

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### 1. THE CURRENT DEVELOPMENT OF PALEOLITHIC ARCHAEOLOGY IN CHINA

The discovery of Paleolithic relics by the French paleontologist E. Licent in Gansu in June 1920 opened the prelude of Paleolithic archaeology in China. From

the 1920s to the end of the 1940s, it was the first period of Paleolithic archaeology in China, and the discovery of sites such as Peking man, Hetao man and Upper Cave Man laid a high starting point for Paleolithic archaeology in China. Since the founding of the Republic, based on the continued excavation of the Zhoukoudian site, Chinese Paleolithic archaeology has expanded to North China, Northwest China, Southwest China, and Southeast China, and a large number of Paleolithic archaeological remains have laid a solid foundation for the development of Chinese Paleolithic archaeology. Since the 1980s, Paleolithic archaeology has flourished, with many achievements in both site discovery excavation and theoretical methodology, and has gradually matured in a disciplinary sense.

In the process, Chinese archaeologists have gradually established the developmental sequence of the Chinese Paleolithic, and the complexity of early Chinese civilization has been gradually revealed. With the increase of archaeological discoveries and the advancement of science and technology in recent years, the field of vision of Paleolithic archaeology has become broader. A series of newly discovered Paleolithic sites in southern China reveal the diversity and complexity of cultures from different periods. Chinese Paleolithic archaeologists can start with stone tools and discuss the culture, ethnic migration and social exchange of the Paleolithic age from the perspective of types and production technology. That is to say, China's Paleolithic archaeology has gone through the stages of excavating a single Paleolithic site, simply dividing the north-south flora, and today being able to divide multiple flora and explore the exchange and interaction between the restored flora. At present, China's Paleolithic archaeology has gone beyond the stage of site description and typological significance comparison. Instead, on the basis of gradual accumulation, it has begun to restore the social conditions of the Paleolithic Age, moving from “things” to “people”, trying to reconstruct

the survival and living conditions of “people” in that era.

The introduction of new technologies and theories brings great driving force to the development of Paleolithic archaeology; along with the inevitable trend of interdisciplinarity, archaeology will also be integrated into the framework of material culture studies.

## 2. REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF THE STATUS OF PALEOLITHIC ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF MATERIAL CULTURE

It is generally accepted that the study of material culture began in the 1970s. Ann Martin and J. Garrison’s book *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field* identifies three major sources of material culture studies: anthropology, social history, and art history (Martin & Garrison, 1997). It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that material culture gained the attention of many humanities and social sciences, including sociology and psychology. The convening of the Winterthur Conference in 1993 is generally considered to mark the maturity of “material and cultural research”. The meeting held that the study of material culture should not be limited to the descriptive study of “things”, and all disciplines should pay attention to “the relevant context and culture in which things are made and used” (p.3).

After entering the 21st century, material culture research has further developed, and two characteristics have emerged in terms of research methods: one is the focus on the different meanings of “things” in different contexts. The second is the strong interdisciplinarity of research methods, using psychology, anthropology and other related disciplines to form a crossover. The participation of multiple disciplinary perspectives has led to an unprecedentedly broad vision of material culture research, thus breaking the centrality of “things”. For material culture researchers, “things” as a kind of record or evidence are involved in the construction of human identity and social relations, and the center of material culture research is people, who cannot exist apart from them.

The “material” being studied is a record, or rather, a legacy of the past. The concept of heritage, then, is also changing and expanding. Traditionally, cultural heritage is considered to be the relics of the past, with a focus on “things”. Nowadays, the concept of heritage has moved away from “things” or history, and refers to the attitude toward the past and the relationship with the past - cultural heritage is “left behind” and actually it represents a choice. That is, places, objects and other contents are considered to represent the past and remain. In this sense, heritage is actually a medium to express people’s concern about the past. In addition to the physical places where these exact objects are recorded, some practices can also be used as heritage, that is, intangible cultural heritage. “Material, place and practice” has become the most basic

expression of contemporary heritage.

The object of study in Paleolithic archaeology is precisely the Paleolithic remains and relics, and before examining their place in the study of material culture, the concept must first be defined. When discussing the concept of Paleolithic archaeology, it is important to first discuss the Stone Age. The Stone Age, the era when humans used stone tools for production, was the beginning of human history and lasted for about three million years. In archaeology, the Stone Age is divided into the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic eras. The Paleolithic period, which lasted from about 2.58 million years ago to after 10,000 years ago, was an era dominated by the use of knapped stone tools. And the history of human making stone tools may date back to 3.3 million years ago. The age of Paleolithic Age is defined. Paleolithic Archaeology is a discipline that takes the remains and relics of early human beings buried in Pleistocene strata as the research object, studies the culture, behavior and lifestyle of human beings at that time with archaeological methods, and combines the research methods of geology, paleontology and other disciplines to reconstruct the changes of natural environment, the development of human physique and the changes of social organizations, so as to clarify the emergence and development of early human culture.

By sorting through the above concepts, it is clear that the Paleolithic is so far away that there are no documented records to refer to, and the discovery of each site is invaluable to our understanding of the Paleolithic way of human existence. Therefore, the remains of Paleolithic sites automatically gain representation of the Paleolithic period. The study of Paleolithic material culture must rely on Paleolithic archaeology, which is still at the stage of descriptive study of remains and relics and the construction of a system based on them, and is still far from the goal of exploring the “people” themselves. In addition, in terms of time, the archaeology of Neolithic and post-Paleolithic stone tools is useful in the study of material culture, because it involves writing or symbols similar to writing. The archaeology of the pre-Paleolithic period, on the other hand, is more put into paleontology, which is part of the study of geology and does not involve human subjectivity. The Paleolithic period, as a preceding and following era, leads to a sense that Paleolithic archaeology is the most difficult part of archaeology leading to the study of material culture.

## 3. AN INVESTIGATION OF THE WAY FROM ARCHAEOLOGY TO THE STUDY OF MATERIAL CULTURE

As pointed out above, remains and relics are the object of study in Paleolithic archaeology, but there is an implicit default condition—we cannot go back to the time period corresponding to the relics, nor can we concretely

know what people thought or how they thought at that time. Therefore, we can only study these “records”, but in fact, “we” are the subject of study here. In this sense, any study of relics can be seen as a process of making heritage. Having clarified the hidden theme, some researchers began to reflect on the correctness of binary opposition between people and things, material and spirit, and considered the relationship between human and object as mixed, interactive, and network-like, and adjusted their research methods and directions on this basis.

In recent decades, there has been a major shift in the direction of material culture research, a phenomenon that some scholars have called the “material turn”. Traditionally, it is believed that since the Stone Age, humans have been assigning tasks to various material entities, such as stone axes, plows and steam engines, for convenience. In this process, agriculture, urbanization, and industrialization have gradually occurred, profoundly changing people’s lives and driving the progress of human civilization. In the new research direction of “material turn”, researchers believe that when people manipulate material entities, they inject people’s purpose, function and will into them, and the material entities obtain a kind of “action ability” similar to people, helping people achieve twice the result with half the effort. As humans continue to pursue higher goals, the material structures they create become more and more complex, more powerful, and more capable of “action”, and these material entities become more deeply involved in the construction of human society. Researchers have found that history is no longer a simple process of man controlling materials and driving social development, but that human society is in turn shaped and influenced by these material entities. Thus, the position of material in history will be re-examined, and through the excavation of material entities, we will pursue at a higher level why today’s human society is like this.

The ideological trend of material research has changed people’s cognition of things and made people rethink the status of things in human society. Archaeologists influenced by this trend tried to put it into archaeological practice, and thus Ian Hodder and others proposed the “entanglement theory”.<sup>1</sup> The theory holds that “entanglement” includes four pairs of relationships: people to things, things to people, things to things and people to people. These four pairs of relationships often exist at the same time in practice and are difficult to be separated. The superposition and combination of these relationships form “entanglement”. In addition to concrete material entities, abstract things such as symbols and ideas also belong to the category of things, and therefore also belong to the object of entanglement theory. The

complexity and motion of things constitute an unstable and complex network, resulting in a number of incidental outcomes. This forces people to invent and create to cope with these contingent results and solve the problems that may arise. Due to the complexity and motion of things, new problems emerge constantly, and human beings make continuous improvements and inventions to things. In this process, human-object interaction occurs more and more frequently, and the entanglement between the two becomes more and more complex, to the extent that this entanglement constitutes a background condition for certain human habits, social and cultural. Therefore, through the entanglement relationship, archaeologists can explore the ancient social conditions or the process of social change.

In archaeological practice, entanglement theory has been applied in the above two aspects.

First, use the entanglement diagram to understand the specific situation of ancient society. Archaeologists determine the scope of entanglement network based on excavated materials, draw entanglement diagrams, and find complex nodes involving many relationships in the entanglement diagrams, which are called key nodes. On the one hand, the change of the key node will have a significant impact on the society, on the other hand, the key node involves more relationships, it induces a certain symbolism, such as altars, palaces and other objects or places. Therefore, some specific groups of people will control the key nodes to maintain the existing social relationships and thus consolidate their power. By studying the entangled relationships and key nodes in the entangled relationship diagram, we can know how the key items are highly effective in the society, as well as restore the relationship between people and objects in the society in which the site is located and reconstruct the situation of that society.

Second, entanglement theory can also be applied to explore the process of social change. The entanglement diagram is not only horizontal but also vertical. By analyzing the changes of entanglement, archaeologists can find clues of social changes such as environmental changes, religious ritual changes, etc., so as to reveal the causes of social changes.

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#### **4. REFLECTIONS AND PROSPECTS OF CHINESE PALEOLITHIC ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES**

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After the above analysis, it can be found that the study of material culture requires revealing the profound connection between objects and social development, thus answering the question of how history came to be. The author believes that the entanglement theory can be used to reflect and prospect the development of Paleolithic Archaeology in China from several aspects.

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<sup>1</sup> For the production process of this theory, see [UK] Ian Hodder: The Development of Post Process Archaeology, southern cultural relics, issue 3, 2020.

First, entanglement theory requires the integration of Chinese Palaeolithic archaeological theory with science and technology. Chinese archaeology is still deficient in its acceptance of science and technology. As Chen Chun pointed out: "Scholars involved in interdisciplinary research have different professional backgrounds and different concerns. In the past, when archaeologists asked for natural scientists, scientists and technicians often participated in archaeological projects, such as dating or environmental research, as foil or auxiliary personnel. And its results are often used as an appendix to research reports for reference. The concerns of scientists interested in archaeology may not receive the same attention or even the same industry recognition as those of archaeologists. As a result, technological tools may not be used appropriately to address the major problems of archaeology." (Chen, 2010, p.1) Entanglement theory is the study of seeing people through things, and some analysis of things can only be carried out with the help of science and technology. In other words, Chinese Paleolithic archaeologists must use the existing theories and the analysis results of scientific and technological archaeology to synthesize, so as to better grasp the entanglement relationship. At the same time, using technological archaeology does not mean relying exclusively on it; Chinese Palaeolithic archaeology must also adhere to its humanistic nature, focusing on humanistic concerns and avoiding the tendency to emphasise objects over people.

Secondly, entanglement theory calls for a rethinking of research strategies among Chinese Palaeolithic archaeologists. Benedetto Croce once pointed out: "after history is separated from living vouchers and becomes a chronicle, it is no longer a spiritual activity but just a thing, just a compound of sound and other symbols." (Croce, 2018, p.9) Everything in the past can not be reconsidered. In this sense, what historians do is based on the past, not restore history. The same is true of Paleolithic Archaeology in China. Entanglement theory constructs entanglement network through archaeological materials, but entanglement network is not equal to historical truth, and it is also constructed. In fact, the construction of entanglement network by archaeologists is not only influenced by the fineness of materials themselves, but also related to archaeologists' knowledge background and logical construction ability. Therefore, the entanglement network itself is limited by conditions and cognitive deviation, which may always be incomplete, so it is necessary for Chinese paleolithic archaeologists to constantly reflect on the existing research results.

Third, the entanglement theory puts forward higher requirements on the field excavation methods of Paleolithic archaeology. Entanglement theory emphasizes the complexity and contingency of entanglement relationship, so it requires higher accuracy of archaeological materials. In addition, when excavating

the site, we should also pay attention to the background of time, space and coexistence relationship. On this basis, a more detailed functional analysis of the material itself and the interaction between relics can be carried out, so as to construct a detailed entanglement diagram. Only with this information can we better clarify the entanglement relationship and draw a conclusion close to the historical truth. A detailed record will also facilitate follow-up research, using entanglement theory to explore larger propositions within a solid archaeological foundation. As Hodder and others have used entanglement theory to examine the origins of agriculture in the Near East (Liu, 2021), and Chinese Paleolithic archaeology also contained the possibility of using entanglement theory to explore propositions such as the origin of Chinese agriculture.

Entanglement theory generated under the ideological trend of material research is a new research perspective for archaeology. It breaks the traditional descriptive research on things, but observes people through things, and explores the dependence and attachment relationship between people and things, so as to help us understand the development of ancient society and explore the key factors that promote social change. With the discovery of more Paleolithic sites in China and the progress of archaeological technology, this theory will help the development of Paleolithic Archaeology in China.

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