

Material Culture and Anthropology

— An Interview with Anthropologist Michael Rowlands
of the University College London

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Abstract: Prof. Michael Rowlands discusses how to use material culture to explore the formation and use of objects, the history of objects, and the relationship between objects and history. He uses examples drawn from his academic background, and his fieldwork done in Africa and China. He further gives an in-depth discussion on the relationship between material culture and anthropology as well as archaeology and anthropology. He proposes specific views on how to develop historical anthropology by using material culture, and the combination of archaeology with anthropology. He states that in the future, the focus of anthropology will shift or move away from America and Europe to the rest of the world, and that it is possible that the current understanding of anthropology that comes from European and American Anthropology will no longer be accepted as being the truth. Therefore, finding new ways of thinking is necessary for the future development of anthropology.

Key Words: material culture; anthropology; archaeology; heritage

Background: Prof. Michael Rowlands was invited by Southwest University for Nationalities in Chengdu to give a lecture on “Heritage, History and Memory: China Case” in April 2013. During his stay in Chengdu, the editorial department of *Journal of Ethnology* of Southwest University for Nationalities entrusted Dr. Bian Simei to interview him.

Bian: *This will be a very brief interview about your research and your academic life. Could you please give us a very brief introduction about your educational background, your main topics of research, and opinions?*

Rowlands: Right. I did my first degree in anthropology in London at University College where I’m still working now. At that time, the Anthropology Department of the University College London was the only department in the UK that taught

anthropology with an America style program. In other words, you have four fields in anthropology. You have social anthropology, physical anthropology, linguistics, and you would also do some archaeology on material culture. This was seen as very exceptional within the traditional idea of social anthropology in Britain. The founder of the department was an anthropologist named Daryll Forde. And he was particularly interested in “material anthropology”. He thought the students should be taught about the everyday life of the people, not just ethnic social relations, religion, myth and cosmology. He also thought that the material basis of society was important and had been ignored.

I was influenced by the idea of “material anthropology”, and the idea that anthropology needed to focus on the holistic, on the broad understanding of the society and culture both in terms of

the biological, and social aspects of life. So I think that the emphasis that human beings are both biological organisms, as well as social organisms, and understanding the relationship between the biological conditions of being human, what is to be a human being as a biological organism, is an important aspect in understanding how human beings are also distinguished as social beings.

Also, I think the focus on the material aspect of the life may be that he was concerned with the idea that technology—the techniques used in making things, using things and doing things was important. As a consequence, he made a large teaching collection of ethnographic objects. So, (UCL) was one of the first university departments in the U. K. to have an active teaching collection of objects of material culture, which was, quite significantly, actually used in teaching. You have to realize that today we do teaching more or less 90 – 100% through texts, through books, and to some extent now, and much more complicated today, by the visual, by films, video. But still, when we teach anthropology, we get students to read books, articles. We use texts. In fact, this is unusual. Certainly over the last 2 or 3 hundred years, and I think particularly also in China, objects, and the use objects for understanding how objects were made and used has always been a part of teaching, and of education. And, so he was concerned that the students should also use objects to understand how things were made and used, and that this was a way to understand the everyday life of people, and material culture of everyday life. This thing actually survived quite a lot criticism within the department from the social anthropologists who said that this is too broad; we are not focusing on the real questions about social life; we should do what social anthropologists do, we need more socio – anthropologists. He and his many supporters in this area, particularly in anthropology successfully defended this (new) idea. So by the 1970s, they used the anthropology department for this new approach of being broadly based, with the focus on biological and social, and social – biological and material (culture). And, the department is still

like this today. That had a strong influence on my idea of anthropology.

And, he (Daryll Forde) would then encourage anthropology students also to do courses in archaeology. Those two aspects influenced me, because I also got an interest in archaeology, and I see myself in many ways, still working on the interrelation between archaeology and anthropology. So, these two aspects influenced me greatly—the idea of material anthropology, and material culture, and the link between archaeology and anthropology. I was lucky, as I said, to be first introduced to the idea that anthropology is very broad—a four fields – based department.

Bian: *Was that during your undergraduate study?*

Rowlands: Yes. Those were my undergraduate studies.

Bian: *Then what did you study for your post – undergraduate degree?*

Rowlands: Then, I did a masters in material anthropology, then I did a Ph. D. in archaeology and anthropology.

Bian: *What was the topic of your study?*

Rowlands: The topic was on Bronze Age archaeology, and I also compared it to African pre – colonial history. As I did field work in both archaeology in Bronze Age and then I did field work in Africa on contemporary oral history, and the material culture of pre – colonial Africa. And that was my study about West Africa.

Bian: *That was your Ph. D. study?*

Rowlands: Yes.

Bian: *Then, what was your master study?*

Rowlands: It was a study of pre – colonial I – ron working in Africa.

Bian: *Ok, so what was the main point of your research during your Ph. D. study? You mentioned that you combined the time with pre – colonial in West Africa. And what were your theories?*

Rowlands: My theory was the study of “long – term social change”. And, I particularly was concerned with how to develop historical anthropology, using material culture, and archaeology with anthropology to develop historical anthropology.

This was in a context of Africa where there was no indigenous writing, where always written historical texts are written by Europeans or by Arab Islamic writers about Africa, where there was no indigenous writing, where there were actual writing systems in Africa, but which were not sufficient to be able to say you can write the history, long-term history of Africa just based on text. So it gave me the first challenge that you had to be able to write the long-term history based on material objects, based on archaeology and other sources when you did not have historical texts.

Bian: *So about the material stuff, how did you see history from one specific kind of thing or material? How did you tell the history, what did the material tell you about specific history? Would you please tell us some more details about how to see the history from the materials?*

Rowlands: Well, let me first start with, for example, the study I did on pre-colonial, traditional iron working in Africa. Iron is pretty fundamental for most kinds of agriculture in Africa. Iron appears in South Africa in about 500 or 400 BC, and was very regularly adopted all over much of west-central Africa. Now, If you look at iron as just technology—making hoes, making spears, and making boats—then, you would miss a great deal of knowledge. And in fact by looking at the way by which iron was made and used, you can tell, I think, a great deal of about the total socio-cultural system. So, you have to understand how an object like iron is made and used in a particular context. To give you an example: the way in which iron was smelted in the furnace, and produced from iron into actual metal iron is full of symbolism, concerned with the idea of fertility. So, the furnace actually is described as like a body, like a container, and that making the raw iron is conceived like making a baby. You then recognize that iron and making of the iron is used as metaphorical system to refer to a range of other cultural ideas in many African societies, and with the ideas about fertility, about production, the nature of illness, causes of good and bad luck. And, there are many other examples. So, I would say that by fo-

cusing on the idea of objects, and the technique in making the objects and using the objects, you could ask other questions which you couldn't otherwise answer. That let me realize that there is a "subject" for material culture, which I mean, it has an important contribution in anthropology, and (helps us) to understand the cultural system in general. For instance, if we are sitting here and drinking tea in a tea house, there is a whole set of complex understandings of the nature of tea, making of tea, the pouring and drinking of tea. But also, all the objects associated with that. You could say you want to look at a certain aspect. Certainly, the Chinese understanding of the body, health, wellbeing, you could ask a lot of these questions through the study of tea. Tea is clearly culturally important in China, and is now a luxury. I mean many kinds of tea cost a great deal of money, or tea accessories cost a lot of money. For example, the tea objects, tea cups, tea pots are all very expensive—so tea objects are also related to the understanding of wealth and status in contemporary China. So, once you start to ask these questions about one particular object, one particular food, in this case, tea, you can find out lots of other information about the nature of Chinese society.

Bian: *So from all the information, you can also learn about history. How does history change and how do the objects change? From the food, material culture, you can see the connection of the objects to the culture.*

Rowlands: Yes, exactly. I mean that the important thing is the understanding first (to take) objects seriously, and then, be able to see how objects and material culture give you access to the past, because you can study them over the long period of time and over large areas. Here I'm very much influenced by the work of Marcel Mauss, particularly his writings on civilization, and the way which he described the possibility of being able to look at the special term in the large cultural areas through the study of the distributions material culture.

Bian: *So, you did your fieldwork in West Africa. Whether you got some specific object in West Af-*

rica to stimulate you to come here in China? And would you please let us know from which year to which year is the most important year for your field-work experience for your career, or for your theories, I mean for your later anthropological study?

Rowlands: I think first of all, I first began to work in West Africa in 1975 on the question of pre-colonial history. And I also was concerned then with what I called “the regional system”. I was interested in distributions of material culture, and the way that they seemed to show boundaries which did not correspond with language, or with ethnic boundaries, or ethnic names, nor with the political boundaries. So, I first showed that the distribution of the material culture had its own logic, which cannot be reduced to language, or politics, or linguistics, or other writings. It had to be explained in its own right. I wrote several papers and a book on that subject. And, I think I am also more recently coming back to those questions — looking more in terms of the field, like ritual objects, and the way which in terms of these boundaries of material culture, correspond with the understanding of magic and religious systems. So, the distribution is all about ritual objects and ritual knowledge. I am particularly interested in questions about ethnomusicology, and the way in which music is powerful, not just for entertainment, it actually has great deal with power to be influenced. But, I also work in the Islamic part in West Africa, particular Mali. Then, I went on to architecture and learned about the conservation of architecture, particularly the architecture of the western Sudan and Sahara region of Mali. I became much interested in the way which architecture in the traditional way creates a certain way of living, and a certain understanding of space, and again, the symbolism attached to the house as a container. So, the house is like an iron working furnace, so the furnace is a bit seen as a body, as a woman’s human body, and so, there is a great deal of symbolism attached inside and outside. Different parts of the house represent different part of the human body, and the idea that, the way of the house as a container and is a protective device against the bad things and bad influ-

ences. These ideas exist, even though these people are now very strongly converted to Islam. And, the idea at the same time, that you have the strong belief in Islam. The people do not see it as a contradiction — because they need both. So the idea of how the two can combine, how they relate to each other in a particular setting has also been a focus of my research.

Bian: You mentioned that Daryll Forde, who established the department and who focused both on archaeology and socio-anthropology, and later on, Marcel Mauss, who influenced you a lot. Is there any other anthropologist who influenced you, too?

Rowlands: Yes, of course. I think at the beginning I was very influenced by the debate between Structuralism and Marxism. And on the one hand, I was influenced of course by Levi-Strauss, (and) particularly by Dumont. I thought Dumont was very important. I was also interested in French anthropology which combined structuralism with Marxism.

Bian: Yes. So in terms of your transformation in your research from West Africa to China, What led you to make this choice?

Rowlands: I started to study heritage in Africa. Because I could see that in Africa, there was a complete neglect of the museum as an idea. But I think that was because they already had other ways of keeping objects, using them for important occasions and also showing and displaying them. So basically they didn’t see the need to have museum. But this made me have interest in the way which collecting and collecting objects, keeping them, conserving them. It could be seen as a very active way in which people preserve the past, and brought the past to present. I think it was certainly through Stephan (Stephan Feuchtwang) and Prof. Wang Mingming that I was invited in 2006 to come here to give lecture.

Bian: You met Prof. Wang Mingming in 2006?

Rowlands: Yes. Stephan recommended me to Prof. Wang Mingming. Because Prof. Wang Mingming has innovated anthropology (in China)

as it is. He wanted to have material culture as part of some courses in school. Now, I must say at that point, material culture had become quite popular in anthropology. Through other studies in material culture, particularly on consumption, by my colleague Daniel Miller, and also, on the landscape by other colleagues, and many other anthropologists. So, material culture had expanded into a range of different subfields which (has) now become very important. So, I think this had become known by Prof. Wang Mingming. So I think he asked Stephan to recommend someone to come to participate in some school courses, and Stephan suggested me, and I thought then that I was happy to come. I thought I would come once, and it would be very nice to see China, and, of course, then I came. But, it was very enjoyable and a very exciting meeting, which I enjoyed very much. And, I also enjoyed very much meeting Wang Mingming, and many of you for the first time. It was clearly a great occasion. So I became converted, and I think I'm still being converted, and I thought I would come once, that would be very nice, and then Prof. Wang Mingming invited me again. So it seemed like I was doing something that was OK, so he invited me again, and, then in 2007, we did lectures on civilization with Stephan. So Stephan and I got together and wrote more on civilization, and also with Prof. Wang Mingming. So, we still have to do more about it. Then, after the civilization lectures, there was another occasion in 2008. We also came again, then, I seemed to have been touched by "minzu". So, I've got basically very converted, and now I'm quite keen to do more research and fieldwork in China. And, I hope we can begin to do that now, because we have some funding to do a project here in southwestern China. Through that, we hope that we can become familiar to the Southwest University for Nationalities, and do the research with colleagues here in the Southwest University for Nationalities. That was during my winter time, I was very pleased and very excited. I also go back to Africa. I was there in January. So I'm still carrying on some projects there, but I must say be able to work

in China was also very enjoyable, and very pleasurable, and I think also very exciting. I feel very happy with that there is still something new to do by my age.

Bian: *Now you mainly study museums, right? Or, materials?*

Rowlands: I'm going to study materials.

Bian: *Like what you did in Africa?*

Rowlands: Yes.

Bian: *Do you have any choices?*

Well, I'm thinking of different possibilities and where to focus. At this moment, I'm writing particularly about food, for food preparation. So, for example, I have written also in the *General Chinese Anthropology*, (which) Prof. Wang Mingming edits, I published a paper with a colleague on the techniques of boiling, preparing, and making food in China, and in East Asia, West Asia. I think one can show there is long term historical continuity in the focus on, for example, boiling and steaming of foods in East Asia China. And, that I think it is tied to ritual systems, like sacrifice, particularly the offerings. If we look back 40 – 50 thousand years at least, we'll see very long standing historical continuities. But again, the focus is very much on material cultures, that everyday life is how you prepare and make food, and put it on your table. So it means that nobody asked the questions about it because it is so obvious, and it is not like a philosophical question. In anthropology, it is much more basic understanding in how people live. So I also am attracted to that. So I mean, particularly when we think of the idea of luxury, for example, there are clear certain luxury foods. I think tea, like *pu-er*, which they also say the spirits drink, the liquor which there are clearly strong differences about the value and understanding of the quality of these food, and they cost a lot of money to buy them. So it would be interesting to study them, the idea of luxury, the idea of authenticity.

I'm very happy that there is a major growth of museums, and the importance of museums in China in the last 10 to 15 years since 1995. These museums are very much in the way of State organ-

ized. So, the museums are built in a massive, monumental scale in order to transmit one particular story of the past, which must be the only story about the past. Well, I'm interested in the hidden stories, and the way people are still able to express these stories about the past, which is about their past, of a very local past. And, how that past is used by people to maintain locally their identity, in the face of very top-down, very dominant authorized one, as the only one past, only one story of the history. And then, I'm interested in the fact that there are many private initiatives by individuals who just feel that they need to recover or protect the local idea of their past as a heritage in order to make sure it doesn't disappear, or, they fear that it is disappearing and they want to restore it in particular, to find the way in which the youth were treated with importance and want to preserve it well. I have some examples, perhaps. I have some preliminary ideas, like a pilot project around a Naxi site near Lijiang, and also here in Chengdu, Sichuan. But I hope to start now with the project to open up this by being able to form basically formal collaboration with a team here in Southwest University for Nationalities. So, we can send students from here, from the university to the field to do small projects on particular examples, and we can get a broad picture on what the local (history) might be. But, I very much (want to) focus on the hidden histories, the lost histories, ideas about the past, and particularly the ideas about heritage, material culture which people may feel is important but, is ignored. So that brought the aims of the new project.

Bian: *I heard that you and Stephan are writing a book about civilization. Could you tell (us) a little bit about it? You know, your main thinking. Something that you two want to tell us, and you said that you must finish it in three months which you studied ten years ago.*

Rowlands: OK. We began in 2007 with the lecture we gave together in Beijing. And we knew that we had very common views and understanding, but the idea of civilization was in some way, was very different from the usual understanding of

society, culture, organization, in other words, the usual socio-logical categories or anthropological categories of the society, culture, politics, religion were not the same as the way we wanted to see the concept of civilization. When people are saying why they do something in a particular way, like the tea ceremony, making tea in China, it will be said "that's just our civilization". You know, this is the civilization. So when the common sense of understanding of the work which people used often to refer to something which is not the same as the society demanding we do something, or about power, colonial control, but people would say it is just our civilization, that's just the way we understand the civilization ourselves. So, the question that the idea of civilization is obvious a problematic term, because it has been associated with the evolutionary idea of the history and the past. Once there was no longer (the need) for political reasons for conflict, civilization was associated for themselves. So, we have to argue this way of understanding civilization. I think also (that) Prof. Wang Mingming is influential here, because his understanding of civilization also has influences in China, it has been always in a sense of "plural, or multiple". In other words, it was not about different ethnic groups, or different religions, civilization having many different groups, different religious observations, and practices, and yes they will be found or agreed to be included within a single understanding of civilization. So it has the option for being a more cohesive term.

I think I come back to the theme of material culture, and how material culture initially was influenced by the things you could study about the past from the long term aspect, long term change and for large scale of distributions, and the idea of cultural areas. So, I think civilization, in a way, refers to the largest culture, social entity in which people live - it is the largest entity within which many different ethnicities, religions and even social backgrounds may all choose to say that we all belong to the same civilizations. You could say that is same way to talk about Chinese civilization, or Islamic civilization, but I think, in some way, we

have to recognize that this idea of civilization can extend outside something they call Chinese. You could for example, refer to the ways which link to or associate with people between East Asia or South Asia. Or how people in Malaysia could be seen as linked with or as originating in Southwest China or Taiwan. So it's kind of large entities where material culture is an important means of evidence that we refer to as civilizations.

Bian: *That's interesting. You have known Chinese Anthropology since 2006, so for the future of Chinese Anthropology, the anthropology in China, do you have any suggestions or ideas about it? This will be my last question, how young anthropologists can contribute to the anthropology, not just in China, but for general anthropology?*

Rowlands: I think firstly we can already see that the anthropology has dominated most in the 20th century. Anthropology is very much under influence of European and American anthropologists. I don't think it will be the case in the future. It is not that anthropology will not be a significant part of academic work among Europeans and Americans in the future, but I think the focus of anthropology will shift or move from America and Europe to the rest of the world, particularly to Asia, and to South Asia and East Asia, and potentially also to Africa. I think the relation between anthropology and South Latin America, Africa, will be probably more important. But I think, therefore, the real future for anthropology, certainly particularly in China, is to start to really challenge the whole understanding of anthropology that comes from European and American Anthropology. Not to accept it any longer as being the truth, because it is strongly influenced by the historical experience of Europeans and Americans working in particular academic conditions and regions of the world. In Europe, (this is) clearly

because of colonialism. In Europe, you cannot separate anthropology from colonialism and history of the legacy of colonialism. And anthropology, in the way which it particularly developed in Britain, is still strongly influenced by that legacy. In America, I think the issue is more about the indigenous cooperation of America. And, I think that's true for other white dominated societies, like Australia, New Zealand and South Africa where basically the idea of anthropology was strongly controlled and dominated by the legacy of guilt over the destruction of native people and indigenous peoples.

It means that anthropologists in East Asia broadly speaking, and particularly I think in China, have got to say "we are not in this kind of historical situation, that's not our legacy, our legacy is something else." We have to understand what is legacy in terms of certainly long-term historical understanding which is, I mean that is the basis in understanding China. I think there are concepts and theories about the nature of human society which come from China. So it's not just about China or being Chinese. It's about how understanding these concepts in the experience of China will then help us to understand the rest of the world. So you have to be comparative, you have to say how does the concept coming out of China, and working in China help to understand the rest of the world and the future. So, we need China to dominate anthropology in the next 40 or 50 years. Then, you need also to find new ways of thought, new ways of thinking, not just try to copy what American and European have done. Because then it will be authentic, you just begin by saying "well, what they do, we can also do here in China".

Bian: *Yes. Our interview stops here. Thank you very much!*