

How do everyday objects tell our stories?

Dr Denise Kwan in conversation with Tiffany Leung

00:00:00 Dr Denise Kwan

In the UK, where British Chinese, South East Asian histories aren't so visible, it felt that these objects kind of stood in lieu of these histories. You know these histories that we don't readily see where embodied and epitomised by these objects, and so is really interesting the way that these objects kind of orientated a sense of self, a sense of belonging, a sense of history within the past within the present. You know, and what that means about futures.

00:00:41 Lowell Wallbank, Manchester Museum

On the podcast today we speak with Dr Denise Kwan, an artist writer and art lecturer working across social practise, visual ethnography, and material culture. Her project, Object Stories of British Chinese Women tells the journeys of diasporic Chinese women in the UK through their everyday objects, inviting participants to explore how questions of belonging and identity are entangled in the most everyday of things. During the project, the women talked about their lives through these everyday objects and drawing on these stories as inspiration, they then attended art workshops to explore ways of visualising the significance of their possessions.

Denise is joined in conversation today by Tiffany Leung, Community Producer for the Manchester Museum's Chinese Culture Gallery, which is due to open in 2022.

00:02:00 Tiffany Leung, Community Producer for Manchester Museum's Chinese Culture Gallery

Hi Denise, welcome to the Manchester Museum podcast. Can you tell us what inspired the project and what you were interested in exploring?

00:02:10 Denise Kwan

So, the Object Storeys project and that I did was inspired by my mum's pyjamas. So, the Object Stories project was a PhD project that started at the University of Westminster that I completed last year, but the inspiration started probably about five years ago

when I was going through my own wardrobe and I came across my mother's pyjama. And this set of pyjamas. I was just really intrigued by both, kind of from a visual, but also from a textural point of view, and it was something that had carried round for many, many, many years, but didn't really know where it actually had come from. And this pair of pyjamas had this kind of really kind of cool sort of cotton that we get in, say, kind of Asian countries where is really hot, and so, it kind of evoked lots of different memories for me.

And then I started to have a conversation with my mum about these pyjamas, and these pyjamas they're, yeah, they are kind of handmade, they have an elasticated waist, incredibly kind of delicate and also has this kind of floral pattern on it. So, we started to have this conversation and she explained to me that this pair of pyjamas came from Hong Kong, so she'd moved from China to Hong Kong. And when she was moving from Hong Kong in the 1970s to the UK, the pair of Pyjamas was part of a wider migratory wardrobe that she bought for herself along with a wedding dress. So this was part of, yeah, so this is part of a wider kind of wardrobe that she bought for herself and I was just really interested in the story that she was telling me, really. And I was really kind of intrigued how this pair of pyjamas represented a time for her when she was on the cusp of moving from one country to another in her early 20s, and the sense of aspirations and dreams that the clothing represented for her. And yeah, and we had this really kind of interesting conversation just inspired a whole load of kind of art making for me. And then I started to think about you know what might be the other objects that may be at the bottom of other British Chinese women and you know, like sitting in the bottom of their wardrobes and cupboards in that way.

00:05:01 Tiffany Leung

I quite like this term 'migratory wardrobe' Michael Terry wardrobe. So, did you say, you found, your mom brought over her wedding dress and pyjamas?

00:05:13 Denise Kwan

Yeah, and there were a whole load of other things too. I think there was a watch that my great grandmother had given to her when she was in Hong Kong. And yeah, we just had this really great conversation about that Journey. And yeah, just want to kind of open up this space that, you know that is so integral to the migratory kind of journey, but I had very little understanding of how that must have felt, you know, and through these objects it became a way for us to share and also open up an emotional landscape through things, I suppose.

And so, this kind of got me thinking about all the other things that might be sitting at the bottom of peoples, wardrobes and cupboards. And also, I was really interested in how these stories and how these objects, kind of contrasted with the Chinese objects that we might see in British museums and institutions, and the objects that are kind of

sat in the British Museum, the V&A, only represent a very kind of partial history and they're very ornate and aesthetic history, and it has very little sense of its actual journeys, of who does it actually belong to? What was its use? What was its significance? What was its stories? And so, these objects almost become a kind of divide, I suppose, or that journey, and that sense of an embodied history, becomes very muted and under a kind of colonial empire, vitrine kind of framing, in which we very often encounter Chinese objects within the museum.

And so, when I was thinking about this conversation I had with my mum and her object, I then started thinking about how speaking to other British Chinese women, you know, that process of speaking and making together, how that could create an alternative space, I suppose, of embodied voices and experience, but through material things. You know, because objects are very much fleshy extensions of our lives, of our experiences of our journeys. And I was really wanting to create through the project space where women, migrant women can speak to each other, and through speaking about objects, they become at the forefront of defining and shaping ideas of culture of Britishness, of Chinese-ness, of gender. What does it mean to migrate to move to be within another geography, and how these ideas, intentions and aspirations manifest through the material object. And so, the material just becomes, I guess, a lived vernacular object in that, you know, in that way, and so these are the ideas that framed the project. And so, from this I worked with two generations of British Chinese women where they spoke about their lives through their objects, and with the interviews there was a series of art workshops whereby they visualised the stories of the objects through art making.

And yeah, and as well, I worked with a women's group in Harringay Chinese Community Centre, and we collaborated to form this bilingual art school that ran for eight months in the Community centre. So yeah, so that was the yeah, the kind of longer journey I suppose.

00:09:26 Tiffany Leung

Can you describe to us some of the chosen objects and their stories?

00:09:31 Denise Kwan

Yes, so, what was really interesting was that objects for second generation women were really significant and I think way more significant than they were for first generation women. First generation women seemed to kind of put less emphasis of their sense of selfhood through past objects. And some material objects for second generation women became this way for women to navigate and negotiate feelings of Otherness of racism, and to physicalise a past that is not readily seen and to really articulate complex and multi-layered forms of direct and overt forms of racism. And a lot of these ideas guess manifested in a dozen of identical green t-shirts, so one of the women that I worked with that I interviewed presented, yeah dozen of identical green t-

shirts, and she told the kind of wider story of how these t-shirts came to be, and she said, you know, "when I was a teenager, I was incredibly driven, I decided I wanted to study at Cambridge and study IT" and at the age of 21 in her early 20s she started working at Google as a technical engineer.

So, you know, very much she had a goal and she fulfilled it. But in arriving in Google, that was the first time that she really encountered her own Otherness, and she saw herself as a Chinese woman for the very first time and she really felt her own ethnicity and Otherness in arriving in this place that she, you know, that she, that was a point of aspiration for her. And so, this became this real kind of turning point whereby, by encountering her Otherness, she was, you know, experienced a lot of hostility from a gendered and racial point of view where she felt very much physically kind of out of place, working in an environment that was very masculine, that was very white, as well as also feeling that she wasn't progressing in the way that she wanted, and her colleagues seeing her as not an equal, basically. And after kind of working in this very difficult environment she eventually changed jobs and considered changing professions, but then she started a new role within IT, and from that she adopted, she decided to adopt this green uniform. She thought, okay, this kind of, this sense of Otherness, that she very much felt upon her body, how can she kind of negotiate this, and this manifested in this dozen, in these dozens of green t-shirts.

And so why these green T shirts? Appear really neutral. They've been highly considered from this colour to the way that it was worn, so should wear these back to front and so that the neckline would be very high and these green T shirts became a way for her to manage and to negotiate this sexualised male gaze that she experienced in the workplace, as well as also, you know, she said, you know, I'm going to do the Steve Jobs thing, which is wearing the same, which is wearing the same kind of clothing every day. And I thought this was really interesting. I thought this was really interesting, especially in the way that, you know, on the one hand, you know, we can see her as being incredibly driven and she's achieved so much. But at the same time, you know, there are for sure, structural issues and structural barriers that she is experiencing and really challenges this notion, this myth of the model minority that is so easily projected and stereotyped within East Asian and Chinese communities. And I think this was a really, kind of poignant kind of vignette and story that comes out of our everyday things in that way.

00:14:30 Tiffany Leung

And I think this story really reflect the ethos of your project in terms of going beyond that kind of typical, you know traditional fancy, you know, fancy tableware, ceramics or anything like that we see in the British Museum or V&A. And this is something that is very raw, and like, you know the living representation of the stories that she'd been experiencing.

00:15:02 Denise Kwan

Yeah, absolutely. And I think you make a really, kind of key point there, because actually, when we were talking, she actually said, you know, "I would never", you know, "I wouldn't want to be seen in a traditional *cheongsam* dress in, you know, by my work colleagues because of its ornateness and its highly exoticised and gendered kind of reading within a Western context. And so, the green t-shirts, whilst they appear incredibly culturally neutral it's incredibly culturally aware in that way.

00:15:44 Tiffany Leung

I know we can't cover, you know, every single story that you've come across, but perhaps you can tell us about some other common threads that you have uncovered throughout the project or yeah, or if you have any other stories you would like to share?

00:16:04 Denise Kwan

Yeah, I mean in terms of common threads, what was really interesting was the significance of materiality and also the significance of absence. And so, I said earlier about the first-generation women not necessarily holding onto things and this was really significant in the project. So, when I spoke to the first-generation women, many of them would say that the things that they initially brought with them had been poor, and had been discarded, had been worn out. And you know, I guess, it appeared that a lot of the women did not openly place the same significance, or did not kind of publicly speak about themselves through past objects in that way. And I think, you know, this is also another way in which expresses the women's orientation into the future. So rather than looking into the past and holding on to old things, their way of armouring, and aspiring into the future was to kind of, you know, not to talk about themselves through old things, but rather to orientate themselves into a brighter and better future, in that way, so, you know, which really contrasted with the second generation, whereby material objects were so significant. And I think material objects are very significant for second generation women in this project because there is very little about Chinese and East Asian diasporic histories from an embodied point of view that are publicly, you know, that are publicly spoken about, and so material objects become a way of articulating this.

00:17:58 Tiffany Leung

Yeah, that's really interesting. I would have thought it would be the other way around, you know, without giving it much thought, but now that you said it makes so much sense. And you also ran art workshop with the interviewees, right? Can you tell us a bit more about them?

00:18:19 Denise Kwan

Yeah, so the art workshops, so this was, so I ran eight months of art workshops with the Haringay Women's Group, and that was incredibly interesting because in the run up to running the art workshops with first-generation, I remember speaking to people within the community and more widely, and people would say, you know, "I'm not sure if first-generation women would want to do art workshops," you know, "I think they'd rather play mahjong," for example, you know, "I don't know whether they be interested." And we, you know, and over the eight months we gradually kind of developed, yeah, like a collaborative relationship and created, you know, what became this bilingual art school.

And what was really interesting about these workshops was that the women really preferred to speak about their, their stories and their selfhood, not through objects, and not necessarily through like an interview, kind of, linguistic context, but through making and through art. And this became this really significant way for them to express their sense of agency and desire and ambition, through the process of making. Because, you know, when we think about the process of making and collaging, you know, the blank page very much mirrors, you know, their journeys as migrant women to remake their futures in that way. And so, they spoke about themselves, you know, through these kind of collaged metaphors, where they created these fictional stories and possibilities to speak about their desires and ambitions. So, one of the collages that the women made with this kind of vertical collage, and at the bottom kind of looked like it was kind of grainy, sort of concrete that spiralled into this explosion of jewels that would kind of land upon this hand, and so she said, you know, she said that you know "I've struggled so much in my life, I've struggled and worked so hard, and there's so much concrete in my garden, but with my kind of power, I can transform this concrete into diamonds and with this power, and with this energy I can travel around the world on it, you know, and tomorrow will be better."

And so, I just thought that was such a such an incredible, a kind of manifesto, I suppose, and the space of the collage, and in the space of making, became a way to articulate truer stories about ourselves, beyond the kind of social economic perspective, that were incredibly hilarious and humorous and inspirational.

00:21:41 Tiffany Leung

Are there any other significant aspect of your project that you want to share or any other kind of experience chatting with these women?

00:21:53 Denise Kwan

I think what was really, something that was really significant, was especially at the end when I spoke to the women and just to get their kind of sense of feedback, I suppose

about the wider project, was that there was a real kind of need for a collective space to hear and make together. And something that was really interesting too, was, you know, a lot of the second-generation women spoke about a desire for wanting to do more workshops in an intergenerational space with, you know, the previous generation. And this was, yeah, and this was really interesting because it just made me think that, you know, in the UK from a Chinese and East Asian perspective, historically there has been a lot of isolation in terms of the settlement pattern and many of the women spoke about their identity within the site of the home within the site of the family and not necessarily, you know, a lot of the women said, yeah, "I don't really have any friends from a similar background to myself." And many of the women talked about growing up in isolation from one another. And I think this was really interesting and I think in the project it, you know, became this became this temporary space to kind of intervene in this sense of social isolation with one another.

So yeah, so that's been really significant; it's the need for a collective space beyond the home, because, after all, identity, yeah, it's a social process. And I think something that came out to the project as well, with the Object Stories online archive, this, a lot of the women talked about how this became a visual way for them to map their experiences within a context that was outside of the home, and so some of the women said, you know, I feel as though I bridged that gap between the first and second generation as a woman in my 50s or in my 60s. And I think yeah, it becomes this kind of visual kind of mapping tool I suppose, kind of through objects. And I think something that was really significant, you know, in the opening event for the Object Stories, was just the sheer amount of pride that the first-generation kind of brought with them. And they talked about how proud they were to be seen for what they had done, for what they had made within the, you know, within the art school. And this was just really significant in that way.

00:24:52 Tiffany Leung

Do you see this as an on-going project? Because I know this was your research project for your PhD, but would you have future plans for it?

00:25:03 Denise Kwan

I definitely, I mean, there are, I've definitely got plans to think about, yeah, possibly publishing the Object Stories as a book, for sure. And I think in terms of the social practise elements of it, I feel that right now with COVID-19, with the pandemic, it brings another layer of isolation as well as the racism that a lot of East Asian and Chinese communities have experienced, and so I'm currently, I've just finished a whole load of digital workshops that are bringing together people of East Asian backgrounds to collectively make and hear each other, and so that is another, I guess, offshoot of the Object Stories project as well.

00:25:55 Tiffany Leung

Yeah, well, great. That sounds really interesting, and I look forward to hearing more about what comes out of those projects.

00:26:05 Denise Kwan

Thank you, yeah, it's been really great to talk about this too.