

Context Analysis of Archaeological Materials: Case Studies in Agate Beads and Stoneware Jars in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of historical archaeology is not to pile up newly discovered objects but to provide contextual information for unearthed materials. One of the key issues in Taiwanese historical archaeology is how exotic goods were integrated into the existing meaning and value systems of local objects in Taiwan pursuant to participation in the early modern world system. This question could produce valuable historical knowledge through the systematic analysis of archaeological materials with contextual information.

This paper serves two purposes: firstly, to examine how exogenous materials become treated as indigenous objects via the archaeological and ethnographic studies of agate beads and stoneware jars in Southeast Asia, two types of objects commonly discussed in Taiwanese and Island Southeast Asian historical archaeology. Continuing advances in the archaeological sciences constantly renew our understanding of unearthed objects. However, ethnographic evidence shows many Southeast Asian societies treat those cherished agate beads and stoneware jars as indigenous objects passed down from their ancestors, even though those same objects were shown by scientific analysis to be exogenous materials. This tells us that archaeological study should be more than the scientific analysis of an object's geographic and technological origin; it needs to take into account of socio-cultural theories in order to appreciate the role and meaning of exotic objects within specific contexts, which is the ultimate goal of archaeological study.

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The second purpose is to examine how value could be studied archaeologically by utilising information on the spatial distribution and association of discovered objects. Recent advances in the study of material culture have improved archaeological understanding, which suggests that the valuation system could be reconstructed by looking at the differentiation of usage in specific contexts. In other words, a reasonable reconstruction of a value system could be made by a detailed context analysis, especially the spatial pattern of discoveries and association of objects. This paper attempts to approach this issue using two case-studies: one of pottery in the Bronze Age of East Mediterranean, and another dealing with trade ceramics found in early modern Luzon in the Philippines.

Keywords: Exotic objects, agate beads, stoneware jars, material culture, context analysis

