

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Nancy Rosenberger

This thesis contains the cultural biography of Buddhist and Hindu items in a small college town in the United States. It explores different factors that have led to the availability of these items here, what attracts Americans to them, and the meanings they give these items. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both sellers and consumers of Asian religious items. From these interviews four snap-shots within the cultural biography of these items emerged. Kopytoff's concept of the singularization of commodities is built upon to show how objects once singularized can become tools in the reflexive project of the self. These projects of the self shape the culture biographies of Asian religious items. Within the debate of appropriation versus diffusion, it was found that different degrees of singularization lead some consumers to believe they themselves have the right to consume and sell these items, but others do not. This thesis explores how Orientalism shapes American perceptions of these items in spite of the positive image given to them.

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Gods and Knickknacks: The American Adoption of Asian Religious Items

by

Tamsyn L. Jameson

A THESIS

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Tamsyn L. Jameson, Author

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Thank you to everyone who gave some of their time to talk with me about the Buddhas, Ganeshas, prayer flags and other objects they owned. Whether an hour, thirty minutes, or sixteen your insights have helped bring this thesis to life! I hope the final product represents you well.

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## **Gods and Knickknacks: The American Adoption of Asian Religious Items**

### **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

Initially, when I bought it I didn't even know what it was. I was waiting with my father and sister in a movie theater lobby in New Hampshire for a movie to start. As we stood there both my sister and I decided to waste some time and money on the novelty quarter machines. Both of us too old for the majority of toys available, found ourselves drawn to the machine offering wooden bracelets for 50 cents. I can remember putting the two quarters into the painted red, metal bottom of the vending machine, turning the crank clockwise and the clack of the plastic bubble as it tumbled down through the machine and landed in my hands. But, as I would discover later, I had no clue what I had just bought with my fifty cents. As I took the round wooden beaded bracelet out of the plastic bubble, I thought what a fun thing to wear around my wrist.

I discovered a year later what it was that I had so cheaply purchased. I was living in Japan where I worked as an English teacher, dividing my time between schools and the local Board of Education. One day as I sat at my desk trying to look industrious, a co-worker pointed to my wrist, laughed and asked "Are you Buddhist? It goes on the left hand".

The simple, round, beaded bracelet I wore was a *mala*, otherwise known as Buddhist prayer beads. Befuddled, and not particularly understanding his point, I looked down at my cheap, little, Buddhist bracelet. I left it where it was on my right wrist that day, but when I got home I started to think, well if I wear this again do I wear it on my left wrist? But I'm not Buddhist! Fortunately, this issue was solved when the cheap elastic that the beads were strung on broke before I could wear it again.

I've chosen to open my thesis with this embarrassing, little story because it illustrates the phenomena explored here. As items and objects from other cultures are brought into our orbit we can choose to incorporate them into our lifestyles, homes, and even onto our persons, and when we do so we usually adapt them to fit our culture. As an object moves from one culture and is incorporated into another, new meanings can be created as old ones are lost. Igor Kopytoff has suggested that "what is significant about the adoption of alien objects – as of alien ideas- is not that that they are adopted. But the way they are culturally redefined and put to use" (2000: 67). Kopytoff proposes that similar to people, objects have biographies that they are supposed to fulfill and that are shaped by the culture in which they are located, a cultural biography of things, per say. Janet Hoskins further explains:

Anthropologists have long argued that things can, in certain conditions, be or act like persons: they can be said to have a personality, to show volition, to accept certain locations and reject others, and thus have agency. Often these attributes of agency are linked to the anthropomorphizing process by which things are said to have social lives like persons and thus to be appropriate subjects for biographies (2006:81).

My goal at the beginning of this project was to construct the cultural biography of Asian religious objects within the small college town I live in and its surrounding areas. As my sample was small and not random it is impossible to draw a firm conclusion from my research on the cultural standing of these items in the United States. Because of this I have incorporated secondary research that examines the history and cultural importance of Asian religions, their practices, and the objects associated with them in the West. I have combined my research with complementary

scholarly literature to explore the reasons behind and the process of the adoption of Asian religious objects into American culture.

I started this research by first investigating what was the significance of these objects to the Americans who own them. What attracts Americans to these objects? How are they used? Are these items seen as religious? Are they symbolic and if so, how? By understanding how these objects fit into the daily lives of the Americans who have adopted them, I want to understand culturally what the incorporation of these items into our culture represents. Also, I want to show how Americans are adapting these items to fit their lives and possibly creating new meanings for them in the process. To understand this I needed to also understand many of the different factors that have led to these items' presence in our cultural landscape and the American adoption of them.

Within this thesis I've examined why many Americans keep a small hand carved Buddha in their office and why others hang prayer flags in their living rooms. I have also grounded these perceptions in academic literature that illuminates some of the reasons for the American adoption of these items. From this I hope to create a cultural biography of Asian religious objects that not only illustrates the story of these objects, but also reflects back to us something about ourselves in the process. To reach this ultimate goal I have devoted thesis chapters to what I see as the key factors to this phenomenon.

## **Chapter Introductions**

This recent stage in modernity, high-modernity or postmodernism, call it what you will, it is an overriding and all-reaching factor in the way we live our lives. While I never intended it to be, it has also become an overriding factor in this thesis and as such is the first chapter. In this modern age the effects of both industrialization and the globalization are in full swing. In our daily lives we are exposed to tangibles and intangibles from all over the globe at a rate that is as fast as our internet connections will allow. Counteracting this has been an increased inwardness in society and in our psyches. Within the modern environment we question who we really are, what that means and engage in what Anthony Giddens (1999) refers to as “a reflexive project of the self” to find the answers. Modernity has also increased the importance of the home. The home is now seen as a refuge from the crushing daily grind and uncertainty that lies outside its doors. This chapter will examine these factors and how they relate to the availability, acceptance and American adoption of Asian religious items.

Part of comprehending why people own Buddhist and Hindu items is understanding why we fill our homes, offices and lives with ‘stuff’ in the first place. Chapter two provides a background in theories centered in material culture, anthropology and consumer behavior that investigates the relationship people have with their possessions. While consumption has been criticized as a negative force on the emotional development of society I show how material good can be used as tools in our reflexive project of the self. We singularize objects through various avenues of emotional investment and through them display identity, exercise agency, and

connect ourselves to others. Finally the use of Asian religious objects as tools of learning is examined.

Modernity has secularized religion creating self-determined spirituality where people are comfortable picking and choosing what appeals to them from different religions to create a hybridized form of personal belief. Chapter three focuses on alternative spiritualities and their acceptance into the cultural mainstream. Like consumption New Age spirituality provides another avenue for self exploration and project of the self. The popular acceptance of New Age spirituality has subsequently familiarized Americans with Asian religions and their philosophies. This has led to many people incorporating concepts and ideas from these religions into their spiritual outlooks. This adoption of these ideas in turn leads to an adoption of the objects associated with these beliefs as tools of the self. Drawing from interviews with informants I explore their perspectives on why these items appeal to them and to other Americans spiritually. .

Chapter four examines Orientalism and how it is applicable to the Western ‘borrowing’ of Asian religions and the objects related to those religions. Since the West first began to colonize the East, the East has been fantasized, misconstrued and contorted to be contradictory to the West. Asian religions and the objects associated with them are seen as a resource at the disposal of Westerners searching for an alternative to the traditional religions they were raised with. The majority of Westerners who do this ‘borrowing’ does not engage in a full study of any Asian religion and as such possess a weak understanding of them. Because most people are uninformed about the religious rules and beliefs about Asian religious objects, the

incorporation of these items into our culture is not without issue. The Western perception of these items as a resource leads to commercialization and misuse of these objects.

Chapter five is the ultimate goal of this thesis, the cultural biography of these items. The end result of this undertaking ended up being more limited and at the same time more complex than I expected. As I could not follow these objects throughout their complete lifecycle, I came to see what I was creating was a cultural snap-shot specific to a certain time and place—a moment in the cultural biography of these items. I also came to conclude that part of what shaped the biographies of these items were the specific relationships types of owners had with them, instead of one biography there were several. After analyzing my data I found that my informants could be organized into four different groups based on their relationship with, perceptions of, knowledge about, and use of the Asian religious items they own. These four different groups result in four different cultural biographies of these items. Profiles of some of the individuals within each group are provided and are followed with a snapshot in time and space within the cultural biography of Asian religious items specific to that group.

Finally, the conclusion of this thesis provides a summary of what has come before and an explanation of how it all fits together. I also focus on those elements I found to be the most important and also surprising about the presence of Asian religious objects in this environment.

## **Methods**

Within these pages is the cultural biography of Asian religious objects within a small, college town in the United States. The main concern of this work is to piece together the story of these items in this environment, and the meanings and significance that Americans attribute and create for these things. I believed the only way to comprehend the full picture of this was through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with many different people who owned them for varying reasons. Semi-structured interviews were chosen over a more casual style due to the fact that I only had one chance to interview the majority of people. Bernard (2006:212) suggests that this is the best form of action in this situation.

### **Population Sample and Data Collection**

There were three main groups who were interviewed for this research:

- Shop keepers and sales clerks.
- People who own at least one Asian spiritual item.
- Experts on these items and the cultures and/ or religions they come from.

In total there were 17 face to face interviews and 3 respondents who participated through an e-mail questionnaire. Individuals who answered the research questions through email chose to do so for their convenience and also due to concerns about travel distance.

At the start of this endeavor I imagined the majority of my population would be a diverse group of Americans, over 18, who just happened to own Asian religious items. Also, I expected these goods to be more decorative choices than spiritual items.



I planned to speak with the people who sold these goods, and cultural and academic experts with knowledge about the cultures and religions these objects came from.

Since my research relied on cultural data I needed to find informants who either owned the items I was studying or possessed knowledge about them. The specific needs of this research resulted in the use of a non-probability sample.

Bernard (2006:186-187) explains that non-probability samples are useful for “really in-depth research [which] requires informed informants, not just responsive respondents-that is, people whom you choose on purpose, not randomly”.

In my sample the easiest group to approach and the group I started with, were the shop owners. After speaking with them and getting their permission, I planned to ask shoppers I found in the stores whether they owned any Eastern religious items and if they would be willing to speak with me if they did. Due to a lack of customers at the stores and my concern for affecting the business of the store owners, this did not prove to be fruitful. Some of the shop owners were kind enough to put me in contact with people they knew who owned Asian religious items. It was from this type of snowball sampling that I found the majority of people I ended up interviewing. This is not surprising because, as Bernard explains:

If you are dealing with a relatively small population of people who are likely to be in contact with one another, like practioners of alternative medicine in a small town, then snow-ball sampling is an effective way to build an exhaustive sampling frame (2006:193).

During my interview process I was lucky enough to speak with a Tibetan Lama, an American Zen teacher and a professor of Asian Philosophy studies. From these sources I was able to get a picture of how these items were used in the native

context and how people who have extensively studied both Buddhism (Lama, Zen teacher) and Buddhism and Hinduism (Professor of Asia Philosophy) view the American adaptation of Asian religious items.

I had expected the majority of my interviews to be with people who owned items from Asian religions but did not follow those spiritual paths. As it turned out, half of my sample were either Buddhist or incorporated some form of Asian religious belief into their spiritual philosophy. Part of this I attribute to the fact it was actually easier for me to contact Buddhist groups than individuals who owned items but had no spiritual affiliations. Also, since my research was conducted in a small town, many of the people who belong to spiritual groups knew of each other and gave me suggestions of who I should talk to. For example, my first interview was with Alice, a Zen teacher during her interview she recommend that I talk with the Professor of Asian Philosophy and the Tibetan Lama. She also told me about Shichi Kaminari, a hybrid Catholic Zen group and the White Tara group who follow the Tibetan tradition.

The charts on the next page represent informant demographics. Figure 1 shows the division of gender in the sample. Figure 2 shows age demographics and figure 3 shows the different religious affiliation of the people who participated.

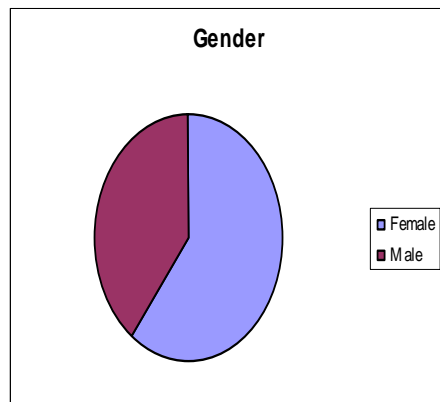


Figure 1

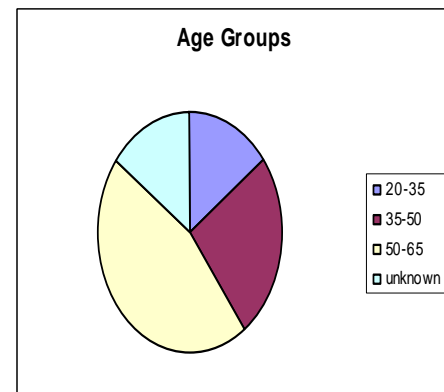


Figure 2

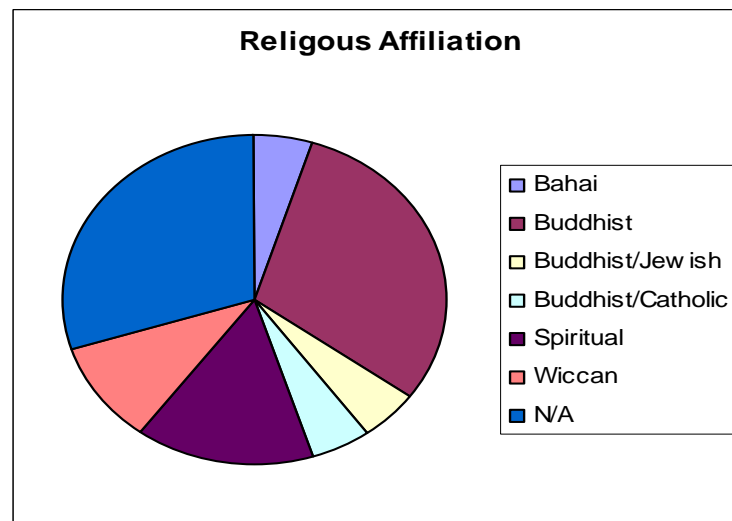


Figure 3

## Analysis

Interviews with informants were tape-recorded with their permission and field notes and photos of items were also taken at the site of several interviews. Interviews ranged in length from an hour and a half, to a few that were under 20 minutes. The majority of interviews were about 30 minutes in length. Interviews were transcribed

and coded by themes with Weft QDA, a free coding program available on the Internet.

Bernard (2006: 452) states that “analysis is the search for patterns in data and for ideas that help explain why those patterns are there in the first place”. Analysis was conducted through a cross between inductive and deductive coding. This form of analysis Bernard explains is suggested by “Williams et al. (1990) and Miles and Huberman (1994)” (2006: 494). As they suggest, I read through part of the literature first from which I developed several themes to search for in my interview transcripts and developed more from what I found in the interviews themselves. As Bernard suggests this is useful if “you have a general idea of what you’re after and you know what at least some of the big themes are, but your still in discovery mode, so you let new themes emerge from the text as you go along”.

Themes from all the interviews were compared and contrasted. Perceptions of those who owned items were compared among themselves and also to the perceptions of the items held by shop keepers. Both of these groups’ perceptions were also contrasted with the information provided by the interviews with experts. Through this process of contrasting and comparing data I was able to gather a multi-faceted view on the cultural biography of these items: how perceptions were similar among informants, but also how they differed.

### **Literature review**

During and after analysis academic sources were consulted to shed more light on the insights that arose from the informant interviews. Since there is as yet sparse

literature on the American adaptation of Asian religious goods, secondary research focused on previous academic studies on related phenomenon such as but not solely The use of material culture in the construction of identity, Western spirituality and the New Age movement, Modernism and Orientalism. The History of Asian religions in this country and also alternative forms of religion were also part of the literature review. Material from the literature review has been incorporated into the body of the text to illuminate and support the words of the informants

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study could be criticized on several different factors. For one it does not offer a conclusive picture of what these items mean to a large group of Americans, and especially ignored those who casually bought these items. While I did spend time in stores hoping to speak with individuals as they purchased Asian religious objects, it proved to be a fruitless endeavor. In the end, the greater part of the interviews I got were the result of snowball sampling. While I was able to interview some people who were not spiritually invested in their items, the majority of people I spoke with did have them for spiritual reasons. I attribute this to the fact that it was easier to build connections to individuals who were attached to New Age stores and Buddhist groups.

For the above reasons my sample was sorely lacking in diversity. Out of the entire 20 informants I spoke with, only one was not Caucasian, the Tibetan Lama. While I had hoped at the beginning of my research to speak with Americans who had either emigrated from Buddhist countries or had been raised in those cultures, the

Tibetan lama was the only person like that I found. Also, I had hoped that at least half my sample would be ordinary Americans who had no relationship with Asian religions or New Age spirituality. Out of the twenty people I spoke with only three fit into that category.

Another way in which my sample was constrained was the lack of socio-economic diversity, although there was some diversity based on age. Most of the individuals I spoke with, particularly those over the age of thirty five, I believe could be labeled as middle class. This may partly be due to location as most of the research was conducted in affluent college town.

It is often generalized that consumers of New Age products consist of white, middle class, college educated people. This stereotype is often cited by those who look critically on the New Age movement, such as Aldred (2000) who see this as spiritual co-optation by a hegemonic group. However, a study conducted by Mears and Ellison (2000) disagrees with this assumption. Because of the limitations of my sample my study does not diverge from the white, middle class stereotype. A larger sample or research conducted in a more racially and economically diverse location may provided findings different then my own.

## **Personal Limitations**

One afternoon when I was an undergrad at a small college in Vermont I went to a question and answer session with a Buddhist monk. It was not particularly something I was excited about, as I had absolutely no interest in Buddhism, or really any religion at that time, but I had to do it for a class. The meeting was held in the clock tower, which has the name suggest was a clock tower, a very tiny one. There were about fifteen people sitting on chairs and couches crammed into the small circular room. I remember the monk in his red and yellow robes sitting next to his translator, a middle aged Asian woman.

What has stayed with me for the past seven or eight years since this happen, was how sorry I felt for the monk at the time. While the translator was there he did speak and understand English and for the majority of the session he was assaulted by questions from whiney Vermont hippies asking him what it was they had to do to be happy. The hippies were foaming at the mouth to get what ever secret of peace and happiness they seem to think the monk possessed. The worst moment came when a fellow student who was generally referred to as Lyme-disease boy, (this title stemmed from a rumor that he had caught the disease a year before and while he had recovered physically from it, he was a bit off because of the experience) started to ask the monk, who I now think was probably from Thailand, about tantric sex.

I have tried to be open minded in my examination of the American adoption of Asian religious objects. This experience and others like it no doubt has shaped my view of the Americans who engage in Buddhism and other Asian religions. I admit I

did at times start to find myself being critical of what I perceived was disrespect for the cultures and religions these items come from. This feeling was less when I spoke with my informants face to face, but between the literature review and my writing, doubts and worries would start to creep up. I had forgotten about that day in the clock tower for a longtime. The memory popped into my head somewhere along the third draft of this thesis. More so than my religious background, I was raised Catholic and am now agnostic, I think the above incident has shaped a wariness in me towards the way foreign spirituality is perceived in this country. I also left that clock house with the misperception that most of the Americans who claimed to be Buddhist needed psychiatric care, not spirituality.

The research I have conducted for this thesis has nearly negated that wariness. Unlike the people in the clock tower my informants were not demanding that the secret of happiness be given up to them. Most of the people who had adopted Asian spirituality in some way saw it as a tool and realized they have to work to improve themselves or how they felt. For many the objects they owned were important symbolic items and treated with great respect. I was also very impressed with those people who were Buddhist. While it may sound like a cliché, there was a calmness about them that seemed to suggest that there really is something to this whole enlightenment thing. I will admit that some of the more “New Age” individuals seemed strange to me, but their identity as spiritual people made them happy.

After I finished school in Vermont I lived and worked in Japan for three years. It was there I first came to notice religious symbols being singularized and adapted in new ways. I was an English teacher at the middle school I worked at and I was in



charge of the English club there. The club consisted of five girls who had joined less for a love of English and more for their hatred of sports. Three out of the five girls loved comic books and would sneak them into school.

I was at first confused and then later amused when I started to notice crosses on straps hanging from cell phones, in comic books and in the drawing of the girls. One girl who was always drawing seemed to have a particular love for the symbol, so I asked her about it. She explained that her favorite comic book character, a vampire wore one around his neck so the crosses reminded her of him. It was this same girl who at our English club Christmas party gave me an inexpensive cross necklace. While I found the present touching, as an ex-Catholic I was some what horrified at the prospect of putting on a cross.

The difference between my perception of a cross and my students' is an example of how the meanings perceived in objects, even religious ones are changed and adapted when introduced into a new environment. Both of these past experiences show how religions and the symbols from them can be, depending on how you look at it, either misinterpreted or re-interpreted. It is this change in meaning that can lead to misunderstandings between those who see the traditional meaning in the symbol and for those who have adapted it.

Even though I was raised in a Christian society the re-interpretation of the cross was amusing to me. I can understand how for others who it is as a serious religious symbol this would not be so. Examining these two experiences makes me realize I am okay when the cultural symbol being borrowed and used in a new way is

one of my own. I am nervous when it is someone else's symbol being borrowed by Americans. Perhaps it is Western guilt which makes me feel this way.

The incident in the clock tower for me has come to be a metaphor for all that is negative with the West's lackadaisical boring of others' cultures and religions. While I did see and hear things during this study that made me worry, there was never anything as bad as the day in the clock tower. My study in anthropology has also mellowed my indignation from that time in Vermont. I now understand culture moves from one place to another and it always has. What may at first seem like cultural appropriation has the ability to result in great creativity. I have tried to see the American adoption of Asian religious objects in the frame-work of cultural diffusion and as a new chapter in the cultural biography of the objects involved.

## **Chapter 1 - Modernity: The Globalized World**

Modernity or societal factors brought about before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century started the world on a course of change that is still in motion. Abstract concepts such as time, space and religion have been affected by this resulting process just as the everyday realities of home, private life and the consumption of consumer goods. The changes started with the dawn of modernity have resulted in the present environment where not only are Americans capable of owning Asian spiritual items, but societal forces make these appealing items to own. Factors of modernity that will be explored here are globalization, a shift toward narcissism, the emphasis on private life and home, and consumerism.

While I don't wish to spend too much time on it, some attention must be given to the term "modernity". Modernity or modernism has been defined differently by so many scholars that it is impossible to give an all sweeping, general definition. Anthony Giddens defines modernity as:

The institutions and modes of behavior established first of all in post-feudal Europe, but which in the twentieth century increasingly have become world-historical in their impact. Modernity can be understood as roughly equivalent to 'the industrialized world', so long as it be recognized that industrialism is not its only dimension (1991:15).

Industrialization, capitalism and the rise of militarism are all cited by Giddens as aspects that brought about modernization. The modernity that Giddens writes of, the phase that we are now experiencing, he refers to as 'high' modernity, others use the label of postmodernism. Giddens believes postmodernism to be a continuance of the

“fragmentation” of modernity not a break from it (1991:27). Giddens explains his reasoning as such:

It has become commonplace to claim that modernity fragments, dissociates. Some have even presumed that such fragmentation marks the emergence of a novel phase of social development beyond modernity – a postmodern era. Yet the unifying features of modern institutions are just as central to modernity – especially in the phase of high modernity - as the disaggregating ones. The emptying of time and space set in motion processes that established a single ‘world’ where none existed previously” (1991:27).

I believe what Giddens sees as the underlying factor in modernity is globalization. The navel explorations started by the kingdoms of Europe have ripened into the transcontinental outsourcing of labor and the global video conferences of today. This has resulted in changing the way we view time and space, creating an atmosphere where the local and global sit side by side. As such I am comfortable using Giddens’ definition of high modernity to apply to the present, were others may prefer to label it postmodernism.

While understanding the factors that have led to modernity are not so difficult, it is the various aspects and characteristics of it that are endless. Giddens pinpoints three he sees as the most important: “the separation of time and space”, “the disembedding of social institutions” and the “reflexivity” of modernity (1991). All of these work to push daily life from a localized stand point to one of universalization. Giddens explains that “we should grasp the global spread of modernity in terms of an ongoing relation between distafication and chronic mutability of local circumstances and local engagements” (1991:22). In other words as much of our daily lives are dictated not only by local circumstances but also but what is happening a world away.

In Giddens globalized, runaway world we are not only aware of ourselves as citizen of the locales we are situated in, but also our global identities within the rest of humanity. It is here that ideas and practices move from one corner of the globe at unprecedented speed, to affect new locations. Modernity explains how Eastern religions and the practices and objects that accompany them, have become nearly as standard in our culture as Western traditions.

### **Private Life and Narcissism**

Ironically, while modernity's expansive reach has globalized our lives, many believe it to be responsible for a reactive inwardness in Western society. Richard Sennett in "The Fall of Public Man" writes of the internalization of social life within the modern era. He believes that early modernization and urbanization created an environment where Western society came to see "private," home life as more valuable, and a refuge from the daily assaults of "public" life (1977). Sennett explains that "during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the family came to appear less and less the center of a particular, nonpublic region, more an idealized refuge, a world all its own, with a higher moral value than the public realm" (1977:20). Robert St. George also presents this as a feature of modernity: "A new sense of personal privacy defined in part through evangelical religion and reform ideologies that focused on the individual qua individual undercut the established sense of public group consciousness" (2006:227). While there are flaws in Sennett's argument I agree that for most the spaces they call home are an important part of their identities.

This turning inward not only happened on a large social scale, but like Narcissus staring down at himself in the lake, was paralleled by individuals directing their contemplative gaze back towards themselves,. Many scholars of modernism see this obsessive absorption with questions of the self as narcissism. Giddens in his interpretation of Sennett's thesis explains that: "Narcissism presumes a constant search for self-identity, but this is a search which remains frustrated, because the restless pursuit of 'who am I' is an expression of narcissistic absorption rather than any realizable quest" (1991:170). These "questions of the self" according to Sennett were due to a loss of belief in the general nature of man.

As both secularity and capitalism arrived at new forms in the last century, this idea of transcendent nature gradually lost its meaning. Men came to believe that they were the authors of their own characters that every event in their lives must have meaning in terms of defining themselves, but what this meaning was, the instabilities and contradictions of their lives made it difficult to say (Sennett, 1977:339).

While Sennett does not refer to these changes as "modernity" or modernism, this is what he is writing about. Giddens who plainly labels these factors as modernity writes:

Modernity breaks down the protective framework of the small community and of tradition, replacing these with much larger, impersonal organizations. The individual feels bereft and alone in a world in which she or he lacks the personal supports and sense of security provided by more traditional settings (1991:34).

In his examination of narcissism Giddens examines the theories of not only Sennett but also Christopher Lasch, neither of which he fully agrees with. While both Sennett and Lasch view the self-absorption of high-modernity as narcissism, Giddens see it as a "reflexive project of the self" in the face of "personal meaninglessness"

(1991:9). Giddens sees the apex of this reflexive project in the form of modern therapy as a “secular version of the confessional” (1991:34). While Sennett and Lasch are critical of the ways in which modern society struggles to understand itself, Giddens sees it as a positive and achievable exercise. I side with Giddens on this debate and believe that like therapy these same factors also draw modern individuals towards a search for different forms of psychic healing, such as New Age spiritually and Asian religions.

Sennett theorizes that western society has retreated to the privacy of their homes; Giddens believes we seek the same in our inner, mental life. Within these conditions, where individuals seek solace from an overwhelming modern world, and a need to know and understand themselves, New Age and Asian religions have become more popular. As the West has been more exposed to Asian religions it is their difference from established Western religion and their philosophical bent that makes them a salve to the wounds inflicted by high modernity. And, as the home has become the preferred retreat from everything else it is the main place to safely engage in our reflexive projects of the self. Within this project objects from Asian religions are incorporated into the home as buffers from the threats of the outside world. For some these are symbols of peace and security, others use these objects in more complicated ways. One man did not see the prayer flags he owned as spiritual by as different. He half seriously remarked that he hoped the flags possess the ability to deterred religious proselytizers from his home.

## **Home and Modernity**

Modernity had brought about a general loss of security as the small and local has been replaced with the global and urban. It is now the private space of the home, the one environment that we can exercise control over, that our identities have become centered on. Looking at the inwardness of modern society Sennett concluded that “common sense suggests, for example, that the replacement of city streets and squares as social centers by suburban living rooms might have something to do with an increased absorption in questions of the self” (1977:28). Moran attributes the importance of home to the fact that “in modern western societies, the house owes its cultural and emotional power to its capacity to separate itself ideologically from the public spaces of everyday life” (2004:608). It is in these safe spaces, out of the scrutiny of public sight that are our refuge where we can hide from an outside world that is impersonal and beyond our control. Moran sees what is outside our homes as “non-places” “such as motorways, subways, commuting trains and office parks, which encourage functional, transient behavior and produce a peculiar mix of alienation and liberating self-erasure (Moran 2004:608). Moran tell us that “people use the home as a counterweight to a public life which has come to seem alienating in its boredom, lack of controllability and forced communality” (2004:625).

As Moran stresses, unlike public space we can control our home environments and manipulate them in a way that they become more appealing to us and reflect back who we are. An example of this can be found in a quote from Mary. Mary and I talked at a local coffee shop. A somewhat eccentric woman in her fifties from her appearance and from what she said, she seemed to be a part of the New Age fringe.



For her, spirituality was a major part of her life and the way she decorated her home reflected this. She explained of the spiritual objects she owned that:

I just kind of keep them all around and I can't say I am very organized about that. I have some that I just, you could sort of say, along with everything else in my house. You can't walk three or four feet without finding something. You know that's really about what it is and that is partly because I like to surround myself with reminders that I am a spiritual being on a human journey and keep that forefront in my mind.

Mary provides an example of the decoration of home space as an exercise of control and the importance of that exercise as a tool of identity. The home is now so vital to our identity and psychological well being, we invest more time and money into it. Daniel Miller writes that for the general population:

The home itself has become the site of their relationships and their loneliness, the site of their broadest encounters with the world through television and the Internet, but also the place where they reflect upon and face up to themselves away from others. For this reason it is likely that people are paying increasing attention to their relationships to their own home, to its structure, its decoration, its furnishings and the array of objects that fill its space, and that they reflect back on it their agency and sometimes their impotence (2006:1).

Miller recognizes that in a modern world where much is beyond our control the home provides for most an environment they can manage and as such a safe space. It is in this space where we can reflect on our place in outside world and how we want others to perceive us. We manage these spaces through the practice of home decoration surrounding ourselves with belongings that appeal to us and we are emotionally attached to. Clarke explains that "home decoration, though tied to key life cycles and events, is the principle means of which members of households attempt to invert, reinvent or perpetuate their material worlds" (2001:26).

Cloud Temple is a large interior decorating store specializing in lighting and Asian décor. The Asian religious objects there are generally grander in scale and in price than similar items at the New Age and Metaphysical book stores I visited.

Owner Steven had open the store a few years ago after finding success selling items he brought back from Thailand from a booth in front of a Starbucks. While business was good for the first year, construction in front of the store for the last two years has put a damper on foot traffic. Steven also believes that Americans are moving towards the idea of home as sanctuary.

Well, I tell you what I see. I watch a lot of programs on HGTV, designer shows and magazines and things that are kind of in my industry, and I definitely see that there is a growing appreciation or desire for people to create not just homes to raise a family, which is the tradition, but to create sanctuaries. Whether it's because the world's a little bit nuts or whatever, or just a growing awareness of the value of it, people certainly seem to be gaining appreciation and an awareness for the value of creating spaces that reflect harmony and peacefulness and all of that. So, yeah I don't know that I see it a whole lot here, but I certainly see that has a trend nationally.

In Steven's comment not only do we see an awareness of home as a haven, an environment that we can control and manipulate to suit our psychological needs, but also the idea that what lies beyond its door is not as welcoming. As Giddens suggests modernity presents us with endless possibilities of who we can be. The modern world has also made public space a place we have very little control over. We may be forced to deal with unpleasant individuals, get hit by a car or be a victim of a crime. It is the home then for most, which provides a space that is malleable and secure. We exercise control over this environment by amassing possessions that create an atmosphere which is pleasant to us. It is within this safe space then that we

not only reflect back on the nature of our characters, but though our consumption of material culture try to manipulate it.

## **Chapter 2 – Material Culture: You Are What You Own**

Culture is often thought of as a vague miasma that permeates our lives and existence. We think of it as the environment in which we live, what we say, how we say it, and how we relate and respond to others. There are so many ambiguous aspects that are part of the culture concept that it can often seem as solid as the gaseous elements from the periodic table. While there is much to culture that is insubstantial, the objects and items that we live with, consume, collect, and idolize can be seen as a material form of culture. If social norms are cultural hydrogen then the homes we live and what we put in to them are the equivalent of iron.

### **Modernity and Consumption**

Modernity has made our homes the most important site to engage in the practice of consumption. St. George writes “one effect of consumer culture on interior spaces has been to drive an awareness and desire for things ever inward” (2006:226). In these interior spaces generally we seek to customize them to suit our needs and taste as they are the one environment in which we exercise the most control. Putnam explains: “beyond the common commodity culture, it is an individualized perception of the social world that activates a strongly personalized aesthetic” (1999:149).

One school of thought believes the importance of consumption stems from the agency we find in the choice to consume and what to consume. Christopher Tilley explain that “material culture studies may take the human subject or the social as their starting point: the manner through which people think through themselves, and their

lives and identities through the medium of different kinds of things” (Tilley, 2006:4), although this practice is not without criticism.

Lasch is very critical of consumption seeing it as a narcissistic and generally pointless undertaking. Giddens explains that to Lasch “Consumption addresses the alienated qualities of modern social life and claims to be their solution: it promises the very things the narcissist desires – attractiveness, beauty and personal popularity – through the consumption of the ‘right’ kind of goods and services (1991:172). Giddens himself believes that consumption can mutate the modern ‘project of the self’ which “becomes translated into one of the possessions of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life” (1991:198). Critical of this he warns that “the consumption of ever novel goods becomes in some part a substitute for the genuine development of the self” (1991:198).

Both Lasch and Giddens present extreme cases in which consumption instead of being a tool of expression is viewed as the sole factor in identity construction. Like those above most criticism of consumption presents an unreal and overwhelming picture of materialism that ignores the freewill of consumers. As Tilley explained material culture provides a resource for us to “think through ourselves”, Giddens though is mistrustful of the use of material items in the modern project of the self, I side with Tilley. I agree with those who view material objects as a means of creating culture and also participating in that culture. In most cases, although there are exceptions, we manipulate objects through the practice of consumption; it is not the other way around.

My research was centered in a curiosity to learn why Americans had adopted religious items from Buddhism and Hinduism, and what that conveyed to themselves and to some extent others, with these items. Understanding the cultural significance of these objects calls for first understanding how material objects are a part of, and also a means of creating culture. The fact is that we buy things; some things are necessities many are not. It has been theorized that much of what we buy is for the meanings perceived and attributed to an item then for what it actually does. The shopping decisions that we make are not only influenced by social class and culture, but reflect these influences also. “Things are the very medium through which we make and know ourselves” (Tilley, 2006:61), what people consume signifies to themselves and those around them who they are. As Grant McCracken writes:

Consumer goods are an important medium of our culture. They are a place we keep our private and public meanings. Cars and clothing, for instance, come loaded with meaning, meanings we use to define ourselves. We are constantly drawing meanings out of our possessions and using them to construct our domestic and public worlds (2000:3).

Not only do possessions construct meaning about ourselves for ourselves, possessions we display in public are read by others to determine what type of people we are. There are materialist stereotypes such as drawing conclusions about individuals based on the car they drive but the majority of signals we send through our belongings are much subtler than that. I was curious then, what types of meanings resides within an exotic Buddha sitting on a shelf among the books in someone’s office?

## **Singularization versus Commoditization**

As far as this thesis is concerned there are two general categories that material objects can be divided into, those we invest emotionally in and those we do not.

Whether an object stands to remind us of a place, an idea, a time in our lives, or someone we care about, more often than not, it has been pulled from the shelves of consumption to be singularized by us. Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff has examined this process of “singularization” and its opposite state “commoditization” (1988). The majority of this thesis deals with objects that have been singularized in some way.

Kopytoff explains that there is a dynamic in societies where products move in and out of commoditization. Commoditization is “a process of becoming rather than as an all-or-none state of being” (1988:73). At one end are commodities which can have a value placed on them and are exchangeable for other commodities. On the opposite end of the spectrum is singularization, items that are priceless and one of a kind. A balance to this process of commoditization is the human need to make things special or singular.

Some things are singularized by society and some by individuals. Besides those things considered sacred or otherwise, “publicly precluded from being commoditized” commodities themselves “are singularized by being pulled out of their usual commodity sphere” (1988:73-74). Since singularization is a process, not an “all-or-none state of being” the intensity of that state can differ depending on who owns the item. As Kopytoff explains that, while culture may dictate part of what singularizes objects, much is left for ourselves to decide. For example many items we singularize become symbols in our reflexive project of constructing the self. As the

old saying goes one man's treasure is another's trash. An object does not have to be monetarily priceless for it to be precious, but it has to have significant meaning attached to it and as we shall see, there are various ways of going about this.

### **Material Metaphors**

Kopytoff's concept of singularization in opposition to commoditization offers explanations of why some things mean more to us than others. Material culture is not a static phenomenon but a continuing process. We as humans create things and in turn those things help to shape us in a constant process. In general we singularize objects by endowing them with meaning or "objectifying" them. Tilley explains that:

Objectification attempts to overcome the dualism in modern empiricist thought in which subjects and objects are regarded as utterly different and opposed entities, respectively human and non-human, living and inert, active and passive, and so on. Through making, using, exchanging, consuming, interacting and living with things people make themselves in the process (2006: 61).

Rose is the owner of the Silver Owl in the small, college town in which I live. She's in her late fifties and while I instinctively liked her, she also intimidated me. She has the air of someone who's been there, done that and got the t-shirt, although she'd never wear it. She is also one of those women who can incorporate large, clunky jewelry and distinctively foreign fashions into the wardrobe and have the rare ability to pull it off. When I visited her at her store her long gray hair was intricately wrapped around her head and she wore an Asian shirt over a long, flowy skirt.

While she is not Buddhist, she's traveled extensively and is well informed about the few spiritual items she has in her store. She became quite animated as she



explained about the long search that went into acquiring a statue of the Buddhist goddess of compassion Guan Yin. She now has the statue which is about a foot tall, made of colored resin and depicts the deity sitting on a rock in a relaxed pose, right knee bent to the side, left in front of her. It is a beautiful statue depicting a stronger, more active goddess than the usual depiction of a straight standing, ethereal Guan Yin. Rose explained:

Quite a few years ago, I was really, really attracted to this form of Guan Yin that I have in my store. It's the form where she's just kind of, actually I say she but it's a he really, started out as a he... It's kind of like this gutsy energy.... I thought, yeah, that's the new feminine..

Rose's story illustrates the concept of objectification and how objects connect to self-identity. Rose saw the statue of Guan Yin as an object open to interpretation which she read as the embodiment of "feminine and gutsy energy". Within this interpretation Rose singularized the statue's meaning for herself. She felt a connection to the 'new feminine' idea because in some part it connected to her self-concept or her reflexive project of the self. There is a blurring of the lines between ourselves and the material items that surround us when the way in which we use them is considered. Tilley tells us that:

Material forms do not simply mirror pre-existing social distinctions, sets of ideas or symbolic systems. They are instead the very medium through which the values, ideas and social distinctions are constantly reproduced and legitimized, or transformed. So differing ways of identity construction are produced through the medium of living with and through a medium we call material culture (2006:61).

Since many of these items are still considered unusual in the United States they can be used to mark oneself as different from everyone else. One interviewee, Robert, was a strongly independent thinker in his 50's, like Rose he was both

intimidating but friendly. I spoke with him on a warm summer day as we sat in lawn chairs on his back lawn. Robert was the most guarded during his interview then anyone else I spoke with, resultantly his interview only lasted about 16 minutes. Also, he had a very strong and very negative opinion about religion.

I drove to Robert's house which was on a quiet street by a high school baseball field. As I exited my car I noticed that on both sides of the street ranch houses stretched out into the distance. Robert's house was remarkable for its fading paint and the faded prayer flags hanging from the two trees in front of it. While he did not know much of the cultural or religious background of the prayer flags he liked that they signified his difference from others. Twice Robert remarked on this: "I mean the thing I kind of like about it I suppose in addition to it just being colorful is maybe there's a little hint of it being out of the norm". A few minutes later he reiterated this sentiment: "But the second thing I probably like about them is they're different. I mean I don't see other ones on the street."

In the cases of both Rose and Robert we can see Asian religious objects which have been singularized by their functions as metaphors. Robert liked his prayer flags because they were symbols of "something out of the norm". Rose felt that the statue of Guan Yin she spent years searching for was "the new feminine" with its "gutsy energy". Also of interest is how both of these metaphors relate back to both individuals' self-concepts. The ways in which they view the objects are singularized by their perceptions.

Where language is dumb, objects can serve to convey objectified meaning, Tilley states; "Material forms, as objectifications of social relations and gendered

identities, often ‘talk’ silently about these relationships in ways impossible in speech or formal discourse” (2006: 62). For Robert, who was at odds with what surrounded him, his prayer flags were a telling, yet sedate way of bringing that to his neighbors’ attention. Rose, who was very opinionated and individualistic, was drawn to an image she felt depicted a strong and gutsy divine female. Material objects possess the ability to function as metaphors and it is for this reason we singularized some of them while we engage in our projects of the self. In the following sections I present different theories that explore the reasons for the singularization of objects and the development of it.

### **Biographical Objects**

Has Robert and his prayer flags attest to, not all of the Asian religious objects that belong to my informants objectified supernatural or spiritual qualities; some were singular for their direct tie to the identity of those who own them. . French sociologist Violette Morin drew a distinction between “biographical” objects and “protocol objects” (Hoskins, 2006: 78). Of the biographical object Morin wrote that it “imposes itself as the witness of the fundamental unity of its user, his or her everyday experiences made into a thing” (Hoskins, 2006:78). Protocol objects are Morin’s version of commodities, those objects we do not singularize.

I had worked for Kirk, a college professor in the past and had always noticed the pictures of various exotic places and the exotic objects he kept in his office. While I was conducting my interviews he seemed a natural choice as someone to talk to. Among these items were two Buddhas which once Kirk explained their

significance, fit with Morin's concept of biographical objects. He explained how they and other objects he has accumulated in his travels related to his identity. "To some extent some people might argue that I'm showing off where I've been, which is probably true. One of the images I want to convey is as a world traveler, more of what I view as an adventurer".

Like Kopytoff's states of commoditization and singularization both Morin's biographical objects and protocol objects are mass produced. It is the individual who through emotional investment separates one from the other. Hoskins explains this:

Though both sorts of objects maybe produced for mass consumption the relation that a person establishes with a bio-graphical object gives it an identity that is localized, particular and individual, while those established with an object generated by an outside protocol are globalized, generalized, and mechanically produced (2006:78).

Hoskins goes further to concluded that amassing biographical objects is similar to Gell's concept of "distributed personhood"-- "a way of collecting 'a life' through collecting representations which cull the memories of that life and give them visual expression" (Hoskins, 2006:78). Within this idea of biographical objects or "collecting a life" not only do we see one way in which objects are singularized, we also see Giddens idea of "the reflexive project of the self" as played out through consumption.

### **A Few of my Favorite Things**

As we have seen, objects can function as metaphor representing meanings that relate to our perceptions of self. One of the most significant meanings that an object

can represent is our connection to those we care about. The importance of objects to social connections is presented in a study conducted by Wallendorf and Arnould. They looked at emotional attachment to favorite objects in both the United States and Niger (1988). As would be expected these singularized objects “expressed aspects of self-concept such as gender, age, and distinctive cultural backgrounds” (1988:542). Objects generally “reflected personal meanings and attachments in both the US and in Niger” (1988:542).

Their most significant finding was “rather than serving as substitutes for a social network, favorite objects serve to solidify and represent both one’s connection to and differences from others” (1988:543). Wallendorf and Arnould found that “favorite object attachment does not appear to be an expression of loneliness, but rather an expression of connection to others” (1988:543). Kayla, is Catholic but incorporates Buddhist beliefs and meditation into her religious practice. She provides an example of the way in which objects connect us to those we care about.

The two ceramic statues in the dressing room were purchased by my parents when I was a pre-toddler. They bought them cheaply in Chinatown to use as attractive items they would put in my plain reach and they trained me to leave them alone. Their heads have been glued a time or two, but they were never badly broken. I’ve always been very fond of them, and when my Mother died, my brother knew I should have them even though he had had much the same experience with them I had.

The way in which objects function as symbols of social connection or distinction in our reflexive projects of the self is an important realization. For one it disproves those who label all consumption as pointless and a shallow exercise in narcissism. Not only are these objects important to our identities but in many cases the object may be the only reminder of a relationship now lost. Social connections

like spiritual concept are immaterial ideals, objects provide us with a place to invest those meanings and hold on to them.

### **Agency in Objects**

While most Americans do not believe in animism, they still speak about spiritual items in a way that suggests they do. Often items were bought with the intention of trying to affect change in the environment such as “creating good energy” or as a form of protection from “bad energy”. One informant explained on her questionnaire that she and her husband keep Buddhas throughout the house “to watch over each room.” Many more people spoke of items in a way that, while not seeing them as “magical”, spoke of them as being able to effect change, or as having agency. Janet Hoskins suggested that objects themselves can have agency. Building upon the concepts of Gell she explains that this agency is present in “the ways in which they stimulate emotional responses and are invested with some of the intentionality of their creators” (1998:75). Evidence of a belief that these objects can create change or an effect can be seen in comments from informants. One gentleman who also was a practicing Buddhist explained of his Buddhist items that:

They cause me to reflect, to observe myself, to study myself, to be a little more mindful...Like a bell they can call one to become still for a moment and to live life closer from that still point.

A woman who worked in a New Age store expressed a similar view:

Um, there are sometimes when people are like “what’s this? I feel drawn to this particular thing. Oh, that sounds good. Oh that feels good. Oh, I want to bring this into my life”. And then that moves them more into the direction of exploring more.

Finally a college professor in his 50's explained how the two Buddhas he kept in his office had the ability to actually make him feel better: "They're multi-dimensional. I think initially they were mementos and now they're more a source of, I look at this one, both of these make me calmer when I look at them". The most prevalent way people expressed the agency of objects was expressing the idea that the object "called" to them. This often resulted in the purchase of the object. Objects also were credited with the power to remind someone of something, to evoke a feeling, to draw people in, "to lead one in the right direction" and to even "jump out" as a way of capturing attention.

Daniel Miller uses another term for the agency of objects. In his essay "Possessions" he offers the example of an armchair that for its owner serves as a concrete piece of nostalgia, tying her to when she originally bought it, forty years earlier. In this example and others he provides:

Objects come to stand for people and relationships; they take on a fetish quality thereby. But what anthropologist once denigrated in other societies as a primitive cognitive mistake can here be recognized as a sophisticated acknowledgement of the nature of objectification (2001:116).

Miller evokes the concept of the fetish, a term used by Dutch merchants during the seventeenth century for the spiritual items that were revered in African religions. Originally, the concept was steeped in animism, or the belief that the object contained a soul or spirit within it (Pels, 1998). While it still holds that definition and others (thanks to Marx and psychology) the concept is still relevant when speaking of the concepts of objectification and the agency that material goods can possess.

Within a true fetish object agency is taken to the extreme, authority lies with the object, not its possessor. The meanings or power the object objectifies becomes indivisible from that object, the fact it is only the representation of the idea is lost. In some way this is Lasch and Giddens's stance on consumption. They do not trust consumers' abilities to comprehend the difference between the objects they are consuming and the concepts those objects represent. When this line is blurred, objects stop being tools within our power they are fetishes that come to have a hold over us.

Asian religious objects could fall into the category of fetish as they are spiritual objects, they have agency, and many of the people who own them talk about them in a way that is magical. The important difference is that the people who own them are aware of the fact that these objects are representation and this is what gives the object its power. Pels explains that "the notions of "inscription" and "enlivening" indicate that, whatever things can do in this way of thinking, their agency is derivative" (Pels, 1998: 94). In other words, it is through the meaning ascribed to objects in our culture that allows them to metaphorically talk, not a spiritual power, although sometimes this can still seem somewhat blurred.

### **Secular and Sacred**

If the agency of an object is such that the object may straddle the border of being a fetish object, can we not also call the object sacred? Consumption is now a tool in our reflexive project of the self. We singularize and objectify objects incorporating their meanings into our identities. If the singularization of objects rest



in our hands, is it not then possible so to does the decision of what objects are sacred and which are secular? Russell Belk suggests just this in “The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior”. He believes that the secularization of religion in Western society has opened “the way for other foci of sacredness”(1989:8). He explains that “as religion provides less of an extraordinary experience, people look elsewhere for experiences that transcend everyday life” (1989:8). “Consumption” though “historically opposed by institutional religious teachings, has gained sacred status in our consumption-oriented and hedonistic society” (1989:9). In modern American society cultural norms have lost their power over the division of what is secular and sacred and this comes to bear over the things or it opens the door to various possibilities we own.

Belk’s concept is similar to Kopytoff’s idea of singularization, offering an example of how perceptions that before modernity were ascribed by societal norms, have now come to rest with the individual. According to Belk sacredness is an investment process and anything can become sacred. “Consumers construe meaning in various fashions and in different degrees of ontological intensity. Objects (broadly construed) potentiate and catalyze experience of the sacred” (1989:13). Belk does go into greater depth than Kopytoff in examining how people singularize objects, either by making them sacred or recognizing those properties within an item. Two ways that are applicable to Asian spiritual items and consumers’ views of them are objectification and hierophany. Belk definition of objectification is “the tendency to sum up the variegated elements of mundane existence in a transcendental frame of reference where they can appear in a more orderly, more consistent and more timeless

way”(1989:7). As we have seen before objectification is investing an object with symbolic meaning and power. Objectification can be seen in the meanings, both spiritual and personal that people attributed to Asian religious objects such as a statue of the Buddha standing in for the concept of peace.

Hierophany is similar to the agency of objects; Belk borrows Eliade’s definition to explain “hierophany involves the notion that the sacred does not manifest itself to everyone” (1989:6), it must be recognized or decoded. Belk provides the example of a sacred stone which “continues to appear like other stones except to those who believe it has revealed itself to them as unique, supernatural, or *ganz andere* (totally other)” (1989:6). This phenomenon can be seen in the instances of objects “calling” or “jumping out” at people and thus revealing their sacred nature.

During my interviews I asked those I spoke with what had led to their decision to buy the Asian religious objects they owned. I was interested to find out if these items were something that they purposely went shopping for or was it a spur of the moment decision. In Mary’s answer shades of Belk’s concept of hierophany or that an object reveals itself as something special can be seen. She explained: “The basic process is that when something jumps out at me like that, there is usually something I am working on in my spiritual journey that it connects to. And that’s really the simplicity of it”. Within Mary’s answer we can see hierophany and also implied objectification.

Mary’s perspective on these items and those of the other informants coincide with a previous study of New Age consumers’ perspectives on religious goods by anthropologist Nurit Zaidman. Zaidman discovered that “mystic objects are those

objects that create spiritual calmness, tranquility, and peacefulness in the user” (2003:349). Also “a few suggested definitions that describe mystic objects as connecting the individual and other realms” (2003:349). Zaidman’s research is consistent with the concept of hierophany. She focused on New Age consumers and their choice of products which are imbued with a singular power that seems to call specifically to them. She found that for the shoppers she spoke to

The process of picking a stone, or choosing any other mystic object [is an endeavor] when one is guided by one’s inner self. New Agers say, ‘the object should talk to me’, ‘I should be caught by it’ such as nature, energies, Karma, or the unconscious (2003:349).

Zaidman views the journey of spirituality for most New Age consumers as an individual undertaking which allows them to attribute their own personal meanings to objects (2003). But the New Age is still recognizable as a group with a diverse interest in a spiritual lifestyle. This means not only will New Age consumers buy products that are symbolic of New Age practices and beliefs (purchasing an “earth goddess pendent to show that you are aligned with the power of Gaia), but they will also be drawn to products that they believe hold special powers only recognizable to them (a crystal that has good energy).

Belk informs us that “religion is one, but not the only, context in which the concept of the sacred is operant” (1989:2). Belk believes that consumption is capable of inducing if only ephemeral, a “transcendent experience” (1989:2). Belk mainly wrote of traditionally secular items that people saw as sacred, but his theories can also be applied to how people view religious objects. Despite this, we can see that people are

attracted to items they believe to be imbued with mystical or spiritual qualities because these are qualities they wish to possess or bring into their lives.

As Mary and others I spoke with explained, it was in times of emotional need that objects which represented solutions appeared to them. Their consumption of these objects was in a way therapy as it helped them to focus on positive ideas. If as Giddens believes, therapy and the use of it to further understand ourselves is actually a process in the reflexive project of the self, then can't the purchase and use of these items be likewise?

### **Mediating Devices**

In what has come before I have examined different ways in which people singularize or invest meaning into objects. I will now focus on one specific way in which singularized objects can be used; a way that I believe is particularly applicable to the concerns of this thesis. It is now time to explore the uses of material items as tools of learning.

As explored above, we engage in a construction of a project of the self that consists of ethereal concepts, labels, and our social connections. We also surround ourselves with the material goods that represent those meanings. In this way objects function as reminders of what is important to us. Soviet psychologist L.S. Vygotsky wrote extensively on another way objects can function: they can help us to control our behavior. Holland explains that Vygotsky “drew an analogy between tools and signs, suggesting that the use of signs altered not only the social “environment” but also the very behavioral architecture of the users” (1998:35). Building from this concept he

put forth the notion “that human beings frequently use culturally constructed ‘external’ objects as symbols to control their own psychological processes” (1998:36).

While I was conducting my research I was lucky enough to get the chance to speak with a Lama from Tibet who had relocated to the town in which I live. I went to visit him one morning at his residence, a small ranch house that he shared with his wife. While the inside of their home had a plethora of Buddhas in a variety of different styles, colorful *tonkas* and posters of famous Buddhist shrines on the walls, I was struck by how mundane their living situation was. One of the most interesting things the Lama said during the thirty minutes we spoke was that Buddhist ritual objects were a form of “spiritual baby food”. The Lama explained:

For example if this one teacher, [a] Buddhist teacher, come [and] then [he] say[s] ‘everything is emptiness’. You can say [to] someone, [to] some new people. [They might say] “What [are] you talking about?” “What is the emptiness?” It doesn’t make sense! But first you can lead, there is Buddha, there is dharma, there is *sanga*. You take refuge and then you practice and visualize a deity, visualize and then, then slowly, slowly, then do. For example when [a] baby[is] given baby food, if you give the adult food then [the] baby can’t digest [the] food. So similarly, at first you can give [an] example, symbolize, and slowly and then [the] real Buddha’s teaching, the main teaching. So that’s why Buddha’s teaching is really, really deep, also very vast and meaningful. So statues and *tonkas* those [are] just [to] symbolize and also with that there [are] lots of rituals. The Buddha dharma are [to] symbolize, [a] symbol [of] how to lead people, how do people make interesting dharma.

Vygotsky labeled items such as these mediated devices. Holland tells how these devices gain meaning through chains of social connection:

Mediated devices are part of collectively formed systems of meaning, products of social history. Although individuals constantly construct and reconstruct their own mediating devices, most of their constructions are not

original. They have been appropriated in the course of social interaction with others who, in turn, had appropriated the devices from others (1998:36).

At their core mediated devices, are learning tools and as the Lama noted so are Buddhist ritual and religious objects. Also, as Holland has noted these are items that take their meanings from social and cultural constructions. Vygotsky noted that “repeated experience with the tangible device may eventually become unnecessary, and its function may be internalized” (Holland, 1998:50). Holland has noted that mediating devices: “through habitual use these cultural tools become resources available for personal use, mnemonics of the activities they facilitate, and finally constitutive of thought, emotions, and behavior” (1998:50). Mediating devices are proof that objects can be effective tools in our projects of the self, resulting in positive change.

This phenomenon can also be found within the use of Buddhist objects. A Zen teacher told how at the start of her journey into Buddhism “it used to evoke a lot for me, I mean when I was younger in the practice the objects were very meaningful.” While now as a teacher she keeps some objects, of herself she says “I bound with empty” and “I sleep in a room upstairs, there’s just a bed, there’s nothing in it. You know the Zen *do*, nothing in it”. According to Vygotsky’s and Holland’s theories she has internalized the meanings that the Buddhist objects previously held for her. This has resulted in a state where she does not need them, or much of anything anymore, which in itself is quite Zen.

As both Giddens and Sennett have shown modernity has lead to a crisis of identity. As a belief in the general “nature of man” has run its course we are

left pondering who we are and what that means. In an attempt to further this understanding we are ever engaged in a reflexive project of the self. Much of what is a part of our self identity is immaterial. Material possessions provide us with an opportunity to objectify those concepts, ideas, and social connections that we see as a part of ourselves. The way in which we achieve this is through the singularization of the objects we own by investing emotionally in and attributing meaning to them. Our possessions identify who we are, where we have been, what we have done, and who we care about. It is the meanings we invest into objects that give them the ability to function as tools in our reflexive projects of the self.

Although Asian religious objects are spiritual items it does not mean that people always perceive them that way. Culture is a powerful force in shaping our perceptions, but in the end it is our personal idiosyncrasies and experience that shape the meanings we see in objects. An example of this can be found in Rose's perception of Guan Yin as the "new feminine". Since she liked the image so much she ended up carrying similar statues in her store and from there others were able to see and buy this version of the goddess.

In this chapter I have explored different ways in which we singularize objects, how we use them and how these concepts apply to Asian religious objects. . Concepts such as Morin's biographical objects, Wallendorf and Arnould favorite objects, and Belk's personally sacred objects are all specific examples of Kopytoff's more general idea of singularization. I have also explored how both Belk's concepts of objectification and hierophany relate to the objects agency and the purchase of Asian religious items.

Giddens has criticized consumption as not being a valid means of creation in our projects of the self. I end with Vygotsky's notion of mediating devices as it presents a solid example of the successful use of objects in this project. As long as we don't forget that the power and significance of objects lies in our perceptions of them, consumption can provide an avenue of expression. Buddhist and Hindu items are particularly useful in the reflexive project of self because for most these items stand for positive ideas. Owning these objects gives them a way to make these ideas concrete and possibly learn from them.



### Chapter 3 - Modern Spirituality

While both Buddhism and Hinduism are ancient religions, their mass popularity in the West is recent, and their stance as compelling alternatives to Western religion is a modern occurrence. Modernity has increased the religious and spiritual options available to general Western society ten fold. Giddens informs us that before “in virtually all smaller pre-modern cultures there was only one main religious order” (1991:194). He continues: “Yet there is now a basic contrast with the past. Forms of traditional authority become only ‘authorities’ among others, part of an indefinite pluralism of expertise which instead of being the one single truth are equivalent to specialist advice” (1991:195). Marler is also in agreement and credits modernity with bringing about an “increased attention to ‘spirituality’ and the diminished cultural presence of traditional religious institutions” (2002:289).

Marler explains the difference between spirituality and religion as such: “‘spirituality’ appears to represent the functional, more intrinsic dimensions of religion, whereas ‘religion’ represents the more substantive, extrinsic ones” (2002: 289). In spirituality we find the more inherent, internal traits of belief, whereas in comparison within religion we find things associated with the construction of things around that belief, such as the organization, rules and dogma.

Giddens attributes the new popularity of religiousness to the fact that all forms of religion be they fundamental or “new” “directly address issues of moral meaning of existence which modern institutions so thoroughly tend to dissolve” (1991: 207). Besecke, writing on modern spirituality agrees “the social differentiation and specialization that characterizes modernity has drained meaning away from daily life”

(2001:366). Religion, particularly those focused on “inner spirituality” like therapy, become active tools in the reflexive project of the self furthering our understanding of our nature and our place in existence. While secularization is often attributed to modernity, it would be wrong to see this as a total break down of religion. What this is a shift towards new ways of being religious or spiritual. Rindfleish has observed that “secularization stimulates religious innovation and/or revival and, while the sources of religion are shifting constantly in societies, the amount of religion remains relatively constant” (2005:344).

Modernity it seems has pushed society towards more personalized religious experience or spirituality by Marler’s definition. Traditional religious establishments such as the Catholic Church have given way under the slow erosion of modernity and during this process new global religious options have seeped in. Because of this change in modern spirituality, we can find Gidden’s reflexive project of the self associated with the consumption of religious items.

### **New Age Spirituality**

Elements of Buddhism and Hinduism are often borrowed by the New Age spirituality movement, possibly due to what we perceive as the philosophical nature of both or their stance outside monotheistic religion. The New Age movement’s frenzied adoption of anything and everything unfortunately results in a clumping together of Asian religions. Within the last ten years New Age spirituality has moved out from the fringes and become a significant part of our popular culture. With this

movement peoples' exposure to Asian religions and the concepts and objects related to them have increased.

Mass marketed self-help books touting Eastern religious philosophy can be found in any bookstore; college students, businessmen, and senior citizens regularly sign up for Yoga, Tai-chi and Reiki classes. Within the last decade, New Age beliefs and products have become more mainstream under such monikers as the spiritual market place, metropolitaneity and mind-body-spirit. This mainstreaming of New Age culture is substantiated by Bowman who mentions such things as:

The importance of individual spiritual quest, interconnectedness, synchronicity, a particular understanding of reincarnation, the notion that spirituality and money need not be mutually exclusive and, the need for healing [as] ideas that have become increasingly common both within and outside specifically New Age circles (1999:182).

York also states that "there does appear to be in the west a detectable and growing dissatisfaction with *traditional* forms of religion" because of secularization (2001:362). Alice, a Zen Buddhist instructor who has been practicing for over thirty years remarked on this trend:

I think that there are a lot of people who are disaffected with their own childhood religious experience. And yet we're all, we're all spiritual beings, like we're all sexual beings, we're all spiritual beings. And, so this is a way for people to make some kind of room in their life for that deepest longing, to be at peace and um, fully alive, yeah?

Many other informants also associated the recent popularity of New Age spirituality as a reaction against Western religion. General dissatisfaction with the belief system one was raised with was seen as one of the factors for the current influence of Buddhist and Hindu religious items and practices.

The new acceptance of Eastern religious traditions is in part due to New Age spirituality becoming more mainstream. Many store owners and others who work at New Age stores commented that there has been a mainstreaming of New Age philosophy and products; Phil was one such store owner. Phil's metaphysical bookstore, Magic Mist, is located in a large Victorian house that sits to the side of a busy road leading into town. He and his wife have owned their store for ten years. Reflecting over his time in the business Phil firmly believed that many things once considered 'metaphysical' had found their way into the mainstream. He provided several such examples of items that had gone mainstream:

Like all the incense, all the candles, the essential oil type stuff that was never there twenty years ago. And even rocks, with crystals and stuff, that wasn't there before. And certain types of glass objects, you know that were just more like globes, you start seeing those everywhere. Twenty years ago fountains, little desk top fountains, were selling like crazy in metaphysical stores, now they're everywhere. So, you know, I mean things like that make sense- they went mainstream.

He then presented the same case for the book business:

And also in the book business the spirituality niche or what's the... genre, the spirituality genre, the self-help genre, and the metaphysical genre has definitely gone mainstream. And so places like Borders have a huge metaphysical section, and even the little book section at Fred Myer's is gonna have it. And so with this migration out of the metaphysical store a lot of other stuff got carried with it, I don't know how well it's doing for them, but it has gone mainstream.

Fiona, a therapist in her fifties has worked at Red Canyon, a fairly large New Age store for about four years. She has been friends with the store's owner even longer. The store features a multitude of spiritual and religious objects from a variety of different religions. Items such as tarot cards, Buddhist and other Asian religious statues, and African mask line the walls. A very elegant and sizable statue of Guan

Yin stands near the door to greet customers. Fiona explained as we sat behind the counter of the store looking out at the customers, that the store's mission statement is "to promote sacredness and connection with spirituality and understanding". When asked if she had noticed an increase in the popularity of Eastern religious items and philosophy she replied:

I think there's been an increase in knowledge just because it's spoken about more. You know, you hear more about it; the Dalai Lama or Pema Chodron their books. There's more, I don't know, awareness just cross culturally. And I think people are less afraid of the fact that if they read this kind of information or integrate it, that that's not a dismissal of some of their other roots, that it's more inclusive.

Movements such as Spiritualism and Theosophy were the precursors to the modern New Age movement. Mears and Ellison trace the beginnings of the New Age movement back to the turn of the century spiritual movements that emphasized "universal brotherhood and comparative religion" (2000:290). The New Age movement that most of us are familiar with today emerged between the 1970's and the 1980's. This trend, according to Mears and Ellison "arose, not so much as a new religion, but as a new revivalist religious impulse directed towards the esoteric/metaphysical/ Eastern groups and to the mystical strain in all religions" (2000:291). Many of the informants who had been college students in the sixties mentioned that it was at that point they first became interested in other religions and philosophies.

Kirk, now a college professor was a psychology student at that time he explained:

I've always been intrigued with alternative forms of religion and so I've always had some interests and been intrigued with it. Back in college, and this is a long time ago, once we decided that psychedelics were not the long term solution to enlightenment or whatever, a group of us played around with some of these things. This is where I got into meditation, chanting, we did the

Tibetan book of the dead. I can remember my friends, John Lennon was doing this, and we were doing this kind of stuff.

Mary, now with three grown daughters, recounted how during her college days the growing fascination with Eastern religion was taking hold:

It was sort of just beginning; the whole process was just beginning. People were just beginning to go off to India and Nepal, to Tibet and um, and they didn't quite know what they were looking for. They knew that there was something that was being said there that they needed to have it.

### **Spiritual Healing and Transformation**

At the heart of the New Age philosophy is a focus on personal transformation and individual independence in determining what spiritual path to follow. Like Giddens's explanation of the use of therapy in the reflexive project of the self, New Age spirituality offers those who follow it a way to be a better, more complete self. Zaidman explains that personal transformation in New Age spirituality "can be reached through body work, spiritual disciplines, natural diets, and renewed human relationships" (2003:346). Mears and Ellison quote Melton on the concept of transformation in the New Age and its centrality to the movement:

If personal transformation on a large scale is possible, argues the New Age, then social and cultural transformation is also possible...It is, of course, this hope of social and cultural transformation of society that gives the movement its name" (2000:291).

Leah, a Yoga instructor, spoke of her belief in prayer and how the religious items she kept in her home and in her studio worked for her:

I very strongly and firmly believe that our spiritual practices change us. I know from personal experience that prayer can change me from the inside out. I'm not convinced; maybe, maybe not, that it can change other things beyond me, but I know that it can change me. And so these reminders come back to my setting intentions for my life that are the ones I want to manifest. So,

they're positive reinforcements of what I want in my life and reminding me to keep my own intentions along those lines, positive lines rather than being drawn into negative thinking and worry.

Often, rather than societal transformation, the goal of this transformation is a better self, healed in some way, be it mentally or physically. Bowman examined how the concept of "healing" is capitalized within the spiritual marketplace. Her focus is on "holistic healing: that which considers body, mind and spirit as one package" (1999:183). Bowman explains how this concept of holistic healing fits within New Age perceptions of spirituality and personal development:

Through healing, a variety of worldviews may be explored and experiences and insights gained, often predicated on ideas such as the individual quest, interconnectedness, reincarnation, synchronicity/meaningful coincidence and a positive view of spiritual materialism (1999:188).

The healing powers of finding a spiritual path were also expressed by both Alice, the Zen teacher and Fiona. Both spoke of an emptiness that was healed during the process of their spiritual journeys. Alice recalled her introduction to Buddhism as such:

A book fell on my nose in the library and that began the whole thing, during a time when I was really, really wanting to figure stuff out. I was pretty lost and a book entitled 'Born in Tibet' by Chogyam Trungpa who is a Tibetan master, and when I read it and the description of Buddhism in that, I just felt like he was describing my mind. And I had never read anything that was so immediately true for me, and that started me off.

She later expressed her view on why people are drawn to Buddhism and its power to heal:

People who, when they go, when they engage in a really committed serious practice, are really suffering and it's all about feeling better, which is what any of us need. When we're having a hard time we're pretty self absorbed, it's just the way it is. And so, it's a wonderful thing when that happens to be

when your self absorption is around Buddha, because it is going to lead you in the right direction.

Fiona, who works at a New Age store and also has worked for years as a therapist explained how, at the age of twenty-two, she felt as if there was a “spiritual void” inside of her. A friend recommended that she “ask the universe to fill it”. And as she explained, “In the course of a year I was on a vision quest. I took refuge. Someone gave me a Jewish prayer book called the *siddur* from Jerusalem. All these things just started coming my way”. It was also at around that point in her life where she heard a speech given by a famous Buddhist teacher from India.

While at first Fiona was worried that since she was Jewish she could not follow Buddhist practices the first words out of the teacher’s mouth set her at ease. She remembered he said “it doesn’t make a difference if you’re Christian, if you’re Jewish, if you’re Muslim, you can embrace the principles of Buddhism” for Fiona that was “the door opener”.

### **Religious Hybridity**

Lionel and I met at a local coffee shop. He had a large pot of peppermint tea that he drank throughout the course of our conversation. While it became clear as we talked that Lionel was a pretty idiosyncratic guy, his appearance was rather mundane. With his curly, gray hair, wire rimmed glasses, sweater and khaki slacks he looked more like a kindly professor than a Pagan priest. Another thing that surprised me was the abundance and eclectic variety of the religious items he said he owned. Lionel



though a Pagan, brings deities from various religions into his spiritual practice. He told of some of the Asian religious items he owned:

I have one small bronze Buddha; I think it's from... Thailand, or somewhere around there, South East Asia. I'm pretty sure Thailand, but not 100 percent. Um, had Tibetan prayer flags, I have more of a modern derivation from there. more of a pagan god prayer flag which includes a Buddha figure and Shiva. I have a Kali Ma statuette and a Shiva scarf and in the Hindu, Buddhist realm I think that pretty much covers it".

When I asked about items from other religious paths Lionel continued "I have a *kokopleli* figure which is what do you call, a *kachina* and you know, just a really varied collection of different little things that just speak to me". Lionel is not alone in his mix-and-match approach to spirituality. The New Age movement is often presented as a conglomeration of different spiritual beliefs. York describes the modern New Age movement as "a blend of pagan religions, Eastern philosophies, and occult-psychic phenomena" (2001:363). Aldred points to the "eclectic amalgam of beliefs and practices, often hybridized from various cultures" (2000:330).

While detractors may see this as a sort of spiritual shallowness, it is one of the things that attracts people to the New Age movement. Like the reflexive project of the self, New Age spirituality provides an avenue of self-exploration and understanding that stresses personal freedom. The ability of the individual to direct his or her own spiritual destiny stands in sharp contrast to traditional Western religions (and in fact Asian religions as well) which have strict rules and codes.

Seen as a reaction to what has come before it, New Age religious freedom is another example of society's focus inward as a result of modernity. The power that traditional religious institutions once held started to fracture with the start of

modernity and within this late modern stage is scoffed at by some. York explains that “spirituality is here considered to be something that the individual decides for him/herself. There is a growing and concerted refusal to be told what to believe and what one must and must not do” (2001:367). Bowman acknowledges “the role of the individual, the focus on self, and the importance accorded to individual perception and experience” in the New Age based “contemporary spiritual milieu” (1999:182). Interestingly, Bowman in her defense of New Age spirituality does not see this defining characteristic as unique to the New Age movement. She states “There has always been an extent to which personal religiosity has been a very individual collage of beliefs and practices drawn from both official and vernacular traditions” (1999:182). Freedom of choice was manifested by informants in the vast array of spiritual items from different religions that some owned. Mary, who is of the Baha’i faith, had such diverse items as an Islamic prayer book, a Zen garden, Christian symbols, “Mayan stuff”, and mandalas.

It is not only those who follow New Age religions who have borrowed from the religious traditions of the East. It is now possible to find a fusion of traditional Western religion with Buddhist practices. Pamela Klassen studied the appropriation of ritual from Eastern religions by North American, liberal Christians (2005). She looked at the adoption of such things as Yoga, Buddhist meditation and Reiki healing among Anglican Protestants. She borrows a quote from Bhabha to explain that “for liberal Protestants the last century has been a time of profound hybridity –of cultural and historical mixing that transforms (and subverts) both colonizer and colonized” (2005:378). Klassen writes of these Christians that “they delve inward to root their

syncretic practices in personal histories of long connection with Asian religions, while also casting outward to call forth a tradition of common human religiousness” (2005:378).

I was surprised during my research to find Christians who combined Buddhist meditation and beliefs with their religious practice. Shichi Kaminari is a Catholic group based in the American North West that also follows the Zen Buddhist tradition. Kayla and her husband are both members of the group and she answered my questionnaire by email. While still Catholic, she has studied with a priest who is also a *Roshi* or Buddhist teacher for seventeen years. She has been meeting with her *Sangha* (Buddhist community) sitting group for twelve years, ten of which they have met at her house. When asked to express her personal and spiritual outlook on life, Kayla wrote a bit of what the Zen practice brings to it:

The personal practice of sitting, daily, informally, weekly with *No Sangha*, and about 3 or 4 times a year in 4-8 day retreats is mine and my husband’s primary approach to life. Enduring koan<sup>1</sup> study is a great support for us in both our sitting and in applying our studies to our daily lives.

In the last few years my husband has had some extreme, life threatening and life altering medical experiences. When we married, I was already a widow. We tend to be very square-on, straight shooters so to speak. We don’t mince words and we don’t even pretend hide emotions. We learn as much as we possibly can about what is confronting us and then we face it with our eyes as wide open and our attention as focused as we possibly can. We try to keep our preconceived expectations to a minimum and focus on just what’s actually happening right now. I believe this is a reasonable application of what Zen study teaches us to do.

Klassen believes the attraction of these Eastern practices for liberal Christians is due to the freedom it allows them to participate in healing, supernatural rituals.

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<sup>1</sup> Chan/Zen Buddhist question or saying that seems to have no logical answer but can serve as a meditative contemplation. An example is “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”.

Due to the dominance of Western positivism, Western Christians have been divorced from their own mystic beliefs (2005). Ironically:

They resolutely pursue a mingling of rituals, religions, spirits and ‘energies’ in their twenty-first-century versions of a healing mission. They revalue their subaltern others not only through revising (or forgetting) their own Western Christian history, but also through renovating their own ritual with the help of traditions that Christian-influenced Western colonialism made subaltern (2005:380).

Liberal Christians in their adoption of these foreign religious practices not only can seek a sort of mystical, ritual solace; it also allows them to see themselves as connected to a global humanity. Klassen observes that these Christians, though “born Christian, white and Western, through ritual they hope to be made planetary souls, delivered by-but not necessarily from-the compromising histories of their given and chosen traditions” (2005:389).

This chapter has explored the changes modernity has effected in religion and what is often label “New Age” spirituality. As Westerners have become more and more disenchanted with their traditional religions they have turned to more personalized and diverse forms of spirituality. Part of what draws them to these new forms of spirituality is a focus on personal transformation and self-healing, both of which are intrinsic parts of not only New Age philosophy, but also the reflexive project of the self.

Modernity has brought about an environment where Westerners seek the freedom to pick and chose their personal beliefs. The self-directed nature of this spirituality is such that those who participate in it are comfortable combining various religious traditions, beliefs and objects. The individuals who I spoke to who engaged

in this practice did not see this as harmful, in truth most did not give it much thought. On the other hand many academics such as York think differently. York is particularly critical of the combination of “religion and commercialism” that he sees arising out of globalism. His main complaint is that foreign religions fall victim to “New Age liberalism” that perpetuates Western hegemony (2001:370). Others like Bowman (1991) and Klassen (2005) see the melding of Eastern and Western religious traditions in New Age spirituality as providing positive opportunities for spiritual healing –a process that is comparable to Gidden’s reflexive project of the self.

Within both arguments, valid points are made. I believe if spiritual borrowing is done respectfully and with a sincere interest in understanding the foreign religion involved, then it can provided a useful tool in the project of the self. As York argues, the Western view of the religious traditions of others, in this case Asia, as a resource to exploit is a perspective based on an imbalance of power. The next chapter explores questions of cultural cooptation and the simplification of rich and diverse religious traditions of Asia by the West.

## Chapter 4 - Orientalism: Perceptions of the East

I asked the professor of Asian Philosophy why he thought Buddhist and Hindu objects and their corresponding religions had become popular with Americans, he replied:

I think a lot of it is they want to plug into some kind of romanticized notion of the wisdom of the East. And there's these fantasies that some how, sort of, humanity's long lost wisdom is still kept intact somewhere in Asia. These images kind of symbolize to them that kind of amorphous wisdom, whatever that might be. I mean a lot of Westerners have these romantic notions that the Buddhist countries are full of all enlightened people and they live in enlightened ways, and the reality is that they're human beings like everybody else, and they make mistakes and do not nice things. Some people are trying to live better lives and some aren't (laughs), it's kind of like everywhere else.

In Western culture there has long been the idea of a romantic, mystic East full of material and immaterial wonders for Westerners to discover, if only in the comfort of their own homes. As I've explored above, people in Western, New Age spirituality often pick and choose what they like from foreign religions, never understanding those religions as a whole. The Western adoption of Asian religious practices and objects lends itself to an examination under the lens of Orientalism.

Orientalism at its simplest definition is the academic study of the Orient which relies heavily on the "ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident" (Said, 1977:2). At its most extreme Orientalism fantasizes the East into an exotic, polar opposite of the West. In her article "The Re-Orientation of Buddhism in North America" Goldberg begins with a quote from Edward Said, from his book *Orientalism*:

It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness; therefore cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they

are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be (Goldberg, 1999:340).

According to Said we tend to grasp foreign concepts and cultures through the fabric of our own culture and perceptions. Said argued that the East the West had come to know, dominate and economically and culturally plunder was more a creation of Western fantasy than truth. Richard King, writing after Said, explains: “Orientalism is as concerned with the Occident and the preservation of Western cultural identity through the projection of an Oriental other as it has been with the manipulation of the East” (1999:33). Not only did the Orient provide wealth for the West, it also provided it with a contrary concept to define what the West was, and what it was not.

Said wrote about the Mid-East, although he acknowledged that the theory could be applied to Western perceptions of Asia, as well. Orientalism is applicable to the American adoption and adaptation of Asian religious objects because these religions and their items are seen as a resource for the West to take from. While there seemed to be a general understanding of some of the religious concepts and beliefs, except for the practicing Buddhist, very few people I spoke with possessed any in depth knowledge about Buddhism or Hinduism. There was also a particular glossing over of Buddhism with people seeing it as an idealized, homogenized spirituality which possessed no flaws. Some informants who held negative connotations about religion even claimed that Buddhism was not a religion, seeing it more as a philosophy. We can view this as Orientalism since the understanding of the majority of non-Buddhist informants (and I may even venture to guess most Americans) is

based on their personal perceptions of Buddhism. As we shall see often this understanding is a misunderstanding, leading to the commercialization and misuse of Asian religious objects.

Much of the population of the United States does not have the economic resources to visit Asia. Goldberg, during her examination of the transplantation of Buddhism into North America, writes that “North American contact with Buddhism is derived from European sources” (1999:343). She continues that “these sources of Eastern Wisdom are a product of Orientalism in the sense that they are text-based” (1999:343). For many Americans their knowledge of Asia religions is from textual sources and media representations such as the internet, popular fiction and movies. Kirk, now a successful college professor, is one of the lucky few to be in a position to travel to the Asian lands that once fascinated him as a child. But as he explains, it was textual sources that he first lit his interest. He explained:

I always read the books about explorers and stuff like that, so I’ve always had dreams of doing that. I mean Europe doesn’t interest me. There is no real sense of adventure going to Europe, in my opinion. I like to go to places that are stranger, different religions, different civilizations, and so forth.

To Kirk, Europe or the West is boring; he wants a “stranger” land of different religions and civilizations. While Kirk may not have specified Asia, I know he has traveled there many times. Also, in the collective Western unconsciousness the East is the opposite of the mundane West. It is this representation of the East as a strange and different place which is an Orientalist notion. Later Kirk shared more recent examples of the East being portrayed in popular culture and the media:



I toy with the idea of getting the idiot's guide to Buddhism or whatever, and I probably will some day. Other than word of mouth, and then the travel books tell you a little bit. I see foreign movies, I saw the movie about the monks who wanted to see the world cup soccer match in Nepal, and brought this TV in. It was all about monastery life and stuff like that. It's called "The Cup". It's sort of a low-fi, cute, little movie about monks who want to see the world cup up in Tibet, somewhere.

Kirk has been to South East Asia but for many Americans it is through movies and popular books, (many of which just borrow bits and pieces of Buddhist or Hindu teachings) that they gain their knowledge of Asian religions.

### **The History of Orientalism**

I have already explored how modernity has led to an increase in the options available and a change in the nature of religion in Western society. Here I will focus on how due to this, Asian religions are interpreted by the West as an alternative and in some cases, a polar opposite to Christianity. Many of those I spoke with referred to Asian religions, particularly Buddhism as a positive alternative to Western monotheistic religion. The Professor of Asian philosophy commented on how Americans, dissatisfied with the religions of their childhood, turn to Eastern spirituality partly because it lacks the negative associations of traditional Western religions.

Traditionally in America have most grown up in Judeo-Christian households and that hasn't provided them with the answers they were looking for, so then they start to think well maybe it's kind of in this mystical East.

This is not a new occurrence, religious scholar Harvey Cox informs that since the Enlightenment the West has turn to the East for a dose of mysticism and magic. He explains that "students of intellectual history have a name for this recurrent

Western tendency, they call it Orientalism” (1977:75). As modernity within Western society brought about a movement towards secularization, Falby notes that new “ways of being religious” “included philosophical Idealism, natural theology or scientific naturalism, modernist theology, vitalism, existentialism, and Eastern religious philosophy” (2004:273).

Initially, Eastern spirituality and its philosophies only appealed to Western intellectuals who viewed it as more of a mystical philosophy than as a religion, which itself is a form of Orientalism. Falby first traces the West’s preoccupation with Eastern Religions to 1784 with the founding of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in England “which published translations of sacred and literary Indian texts and a journal entitled *Asiatic Research*” (2004:276). Ellen Goldberg traces both Hinduism and Buddhism’s presence here, in the United States, from themes appearing in the Orientalist writings of William Jones and others that appeared in the 1830’s, and Transcendentalist writings of the 1840’s. These literary foreshadowings culminated in the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago (1999:342). A few of my informants with expert knowledge were aware of the long history Asian philosophy and religion had with Western thought. During her interview Alice, the Zen teacher commented on the historical presence of Buddhism in America from transcendentalism through the Seventies.

### **Eastern Spirituality, Orientalism and Meaning**

Perhaps it was the introduction of Asian religions by Victorian intellectuals and philosophers that has led to the current perceptions of them as being something

other than actual religions. Falby has remarked that both Buddhism and Vedanta Hinduism have “functioned as foils for the perceived evils of Western dualism”

(2004: 295). Steven, who owns the Asian décor store, echoed a similar sentiment:

That goes back to the sixties when the whole Zen Buddhism thing really started to become part of our anti-establishment culture. There’s a certain anti-Westernism in that I think, where people reject Western culture but they need something that connects them to a heart power. Maybe they don’t like the concept of Jesus because of all it’s connotations, they don’t have a problem with Buddha, you know. Buddhism is safe for people who are otherwise anti-religious. Because Buddhism isn’t really a religion for one thing, in the sense that other Judeo-Christian religions are.

I argue that Orientalism is a factor in what attracts Americans to Asian religions and the objects that are tied to them. It is a dualist, perception of religion which presents Asian religion, particularly Buddhism, as being the positive balance to negative Western spirituality. While a positive view of Buddhism, it is not a true view of it. It is an example of Orientalism as it relies on Western religion and perceptions, not on knowledge of the Buddhist religion. Also, in this view Asian religions and the objects from them are seen as a spiritual resource for Westerners to use.

During interviews people spoke of both their own perceptions or what they felt were Western perceptions of these objects in general. The most common theme shared among informants was an attraction to, or a belief that others were attracted to Asian spirituality and objects connected to it because they presented an alternative to Western religion. This was usually also accompanied by either the informant’s negative experience of Western religion or a dislike of religion in general. Kirk shared his own reason for his interest in Eastern religion:

I think, part of it is from a religious point of view, I was raised a Lutheran, because my mom was a Lutheran. I got baptized and confirmed but I don't go to church. In fact if anything I would say I'm against organized Christian religion, very strongly. Too many have done more harm than good, in my opinion. And so in terms of a spiritual void, I've always been sort of intrigued but dabbled only in terms of Buddhism. I think part of Buddhism that really attracts me in terms of harmony, in terms of its more peaceful, respectful, values, at least I'm aware of, though I haven't it all sort of bits and pieces and so forth.

Descriptions of Buddhism and other Asian religions as being “peaceful”, “balanced”, and “compassionate” were common among those I spoke to who often implied that Western religion was not by comparison. Even Robert who spoke vehemently against religion stating: “I don't put a lot of stock in religious fodder belief. If anything I have skeptical views of most of what passes as religion in our country and world wide” had a positive view of Buddhism. Although speaking of his prayer flags he claimed that “I don't have a religious belief that it any way inspires me to having them placed where they're at” at the end of our interview he reluctantly admitted “I guess, I generally have a sense that Buddhism, at least in many of its manifestations, is a more peaceable, tranquil approach to religion than others”. Interestingly, like Steven, Robert grumpily remarked “Although there are some who would deny it's a religion”.

Others I spoke with saw the morals, lifestyle and culture of the countries these items originated from as being superior to Western culture. The East was praised as a place with a lifestyle that held values some wished to emulate. Alice, the Zen teacher contrasted life in South East Asian cultures with what she saw as lacking here:

You know Joanna Macy who is a wonderful practitioner, has said “Well the point isn't to be Buddhist the point is to be Buddha”. And that's really you

know what it is, and the same thing is true in South East Asian cultures. People are not you know, unless they're ordained and they are particularly in that way, they live in a certain way, they live well. I'm sure there are lots of exceptions, but culturally much more. Like here the predominate thing is to be an individual and to look out for yourself and to be successful and community be damned, right? It's totally different in other parts of the world, where they realize how interdependent everybody is, and there is a much, much, more, much greater emphasis on um, you know, not being so involved in yourself. But anything you do, how it affects others in the community. You know respect for elders. Just really understanding what other people contribute to your life in a way that America is just sorely out to lunch about, I think.

Similar to comparisons of the religious traditions of the East and West while positive, it is still a view centered in the presentation of Asia as a foil to the West. It glosses over the major societal problems faced in those lands. Many people who live in Buddhist countries, particularly Southeast Asia, live in poverty. Women and children are routinely trafficked and force into prostitution in Thailand. Political turmoil and violence is the norm in Tibet. I also know from first hand experience that Japan, a Buddhist country, is just as or even more materialistic then the United States. Also, Buddhism there is seen less as a spiritual inspiration and more as a traditional obligation. This should show that just as the Professor of Asian Philosophy said, that life in Buddhist countries is no more enlightened or peaceful then anywhere else in the world.

Edward Said questioned:

Whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer. If the latter alternative is the correct one (as I believe), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the 'truth' which itself is a representation (1978:272).

If Said is correct then as Westerners we may never truly know the East.

When Said first wrote of Orientalism he was writing of the West's negative portrayal of the Mid-East. Ironically, ever single one of my informants spoke positively of Buddhism. A good number also had positive views of Asian countries in general, some holding somewhat naïve view of the lifestyles there. How can this be Orientalism then?

As we have seen, these perceptions and ideas do not arise from a through understanding of Asian religions. I believe it is possible for Westerns to come to a true understanding of either Buddhism or Hinduism. Modernity makes this difficult though, as spirituality has turned into a personal exercise where many feel they have the right to choose what appeals to them and disregard what they don't like. It is this Western view of Asian religions and the objects tied to them as a resource to use as they like that is an example of Orientalism. Also, for most Americans, their knowledge of these items and religions comes from Western sources which often homogenize different Buddhist traditions and gloss over the intricacies of the beliefs attached to them. On the whole, most Americans are not concerned with having a thorough understanding of the religions these items come from. In the following sections I will show how this enables American commercialization of these objects and often leads to Buddhist items being displayed in ways that can be offensive to Buddhists.

### **Religious Commercialism and Object Use**

Since among the general American population an understanding of Asian religions and the objects that belong to them is rare, the adoption of these items into our culture is not without issues. Much of what is generally known about these items comes from popular American perceptions of them, not what is true knowledge. Some of the people I spoke with voiced concern with how these items were being integrated into our culture. Some criticize the commercialization of these religious objects and what they see as a lack of respect for the traditions these objects come from and the objects themselves. The fact that a cheap ceramic Buddha can be bought at the local mega-mart for fewer than three dollars angered not only store owners but those who had purchased what they felt were authentic objects from authentic sources. This more than anything was viewed as crass commercialism by those I spoke with.

In general there is scholarly debate about the Western adoption of non-Western traditional religions. Whether this occurrence is cultural diffusion or cultural co-optation is an important and difficult question. Some (Aldred 2000; Caplan 2001; York 2001) squarely see this as co-optation by the West of the cultural and spiritual traditions of those who have historically been at a disadvantage. Others (Bowman 1991; Klassen 2005) view a responsible incorporation of the practices and beliefs of Eastern religions into Western spirituality as a positive innovation.

In this new environment, meaning for these objects is mainly self-determined. Some, like Leah, worried about these items being taken out of context and the

misinterpretation or even loss of their traditional meanings. As we sat on the floor of her Yoga studio she contemplated:

I'm very conscious, even of myself of the taking of someone's culture out of context and what that means and I think we're doing a lot of that. People don't in general; don't have a very good relationship. It's I'm taking this piece here...I haven't interviewed people so I don't know how they are using those pieces but it's, it becomes either an aesthetic, simply aesthetic item without meaning or something on which meaning is projected that's not necessarily tied to it.

The way in which an American Buddhist views these objects can greatly differ from someone who owns an item for purely aesthetic reasons. While these items may have significant, even spiritual meanings for most, many are unaware of the traditional histories and rules of these objects. This lack of understanding in some cases can lead to conflict and offence.

### **“Commercialism Gone Amuck”.**

Store owner Rose made the comment that “If you buy a Buddha in Target is that spiritual? No. It's commercialism gone amuck!” While she also has Buddha statues in her store, her reverence and knowledge of the items separates her from mass marketers. Objects and ideas that were once only the domain of those who viewed them as tools towards a spiritual path are now available in department stores. In most bookstores you can purchase a Zen garden in a box for less than ten dollars. A cheap, ceramic Buddha can be purchased at a Target department store for \$2.99.

About half of my sample was practicing Buddhists, and many others had incorporated Buddhist objects or practices into their own spiritual practices. For many of them there was unease about the recent popularity of objects and ideas



coming from Eastern religion. The professor of Asian Philosophy, a Buddhist himself, mused that:

Yeah, I mean it's definitely been mass-marketed. You see it kind of in movies and things like that, like the Little Buddha, these kinds of things. Also, just a lot of the terminology from Asian religion just kind of gets thrown around in very sort of haphazard ways. You know, the Zen of this, the Zen of that ... And people talk about their parking karma, you know... They misuse karma all the time! And so, a lot of these kinds of things have just become part of our Western language, but the understanding of them and the meaning, the way in which they're used is very misconstrued in comparison with their sort of native context. The proliferation of these kinds of ideas in media and in television and what not, kind of helps it seep into the American consciousness, usually in distorted ways.

Alice, the Zen teacher remarked that:

It's just another fad, you know. Some people will come to practice through that, and that's wonderful, and other people will just put the Buddhas in the basement when they re-decorate.

Fiona remembers reading something in a magazine about Buddhist prayer beads that angered her:

I mean it's a lovely thing when there's awareness brought to a consciousness that's spiritual or that can be of assistance, but I remember reading in some magazine when I was flying that, oh *malas* are out this year! Kind of like a Glamour-type magazine. *Malas*, which are wrist beads, you know that they're no longer in. And so it's that type of consciousness, that you just wear it because it's groovy and it looks good, that's where it becomes like a trendy thing, and then it goes in and out. And this type of thing doesn't go in and out.

While the majority of people interviewed for this research did see the recent popularity of items from and influenced by Eastern religions as a fad, it was the serious practitioners of Buddhism who were most critical of it. I attribute this to the personal connection that Buddhists had with the items involved. As we have seen objects can be tools in our reflexive projects of the self. For most Buddhist the

religious objects were significant material markers of their identities. Having these objects available at impersonal, large department stores or depicted as a fleeting fad, devalues the objects and subsequently them also. This line of thinking also explains why store owners who either practiced Buddhism or saw themselves as knowledgeable of its beliefs, felt they had more right to sell these objects than others who didn't. The store owners had a personal connection to these objects, which while not as powerful as true ownership, in some way singularizes the objects they sell in a way that those available in department stores are not. These singularized objects also become part of the stores and through that the owner's identity. This identity is threatened by the growing commercialization of these objects.

Much scholarly criticism has also been written of this current trend to turn spirituality into a commodity. Caplan, writing of contemporary New Age spirituality, states "spirituality has become a fad. It is a household term, a commodity that is bought and sold for millions of dollars, an identity, a club to belong to, an imagined escape" (2001:51). York describes the spiritual marketplace as such:

The religious consumer can now more easily than ever choose to become de-conditioned from the prevailing acculturation of his/ her society and, in some cases even, re-conditioned into a new spiritual practice of his / her own choosing. (2001:361).

York is critical of the commodification of other cultural religious traditions and sees this occurrence as an "outgrowth of liberal western capitalism" (2001:367). Others also see the commodification of spirituality as shallow, and many native and indigenous peoples are opposed to others profiting from their religious and cultural traditions.

A prime example of the New Age taking without asking is its cooption of Native American spirituality. Aldred tells us that “Native American spirituality is one of the most popular and profitable sectors of New Age commercialism” (2000:331). Aldred attributes this to the fact that “New Agers romanticize an ‘authentic’ and ‘traditional’ Native American culture whose spirituality can save them from their own sense of malaise” (2000:329). Aldred argues that most of what is taken to be Native Spirituality in the New Age movement is actually a “bastardized version of [Native American] sacred ceremonies” (2000:333). Also, that there is,

The Bitter irony of these plastic shamans (non-natives who pose as teachers of Native American sacred knowledge) profiting from the degrading, twisted versions of Native American rituals while many indigenous people still live below the poverty level (2000:333).

Klassen (2005) has examined this as it relates to Asian religions and sees a discrepancy in power when Asian religions are commodified as a resource “In a ‘spiritual marketplace’ the designation of fad-a fleeting and consumerist trend-devalues the questing of the religious shopper who plucks ‘nuggets’ from Zen, Tantra or Yoga” (2005:380). This imbalance of power can be seen as appropriation and rises from a belief “that particular religions and cultures are discrete historical channels owned, tended or guarded by certain peoples” (2005:380). Klassen explains that Western borrowing from these traditions is further complicated by a historical relationship in which the West has long exploited and dominated those who own these traditions. Unlike Aldred though, Klassen argues that if done respectfully the adoption of Asian ritual in to Western religious practice can result in a positive “ritual creativity”.

While Aldred's anger at "plastic shamans" is understandable, the example she provides seems to be from the fringes of the New Age. She never mentions that some Native Americans pass on traditions to outsiders as a way to ensure that their culture lives on. York grudgingly acknowledges that sometimes the original bearers themselves are complicit or even active in the disseminatory role of encouraging "religio-cultural exportation" (2001:368). Some examples he cites are "Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, Hindu swamis, Japanese Shidon Aikido teachers, and Chinese martial arts masters" (2001:368).

Although he was quite critical of the commercialization of Buddhist objects the Tibetan Lama I spoke with was quite happy to have Western converts. Knowing that most American did not understand these items in depth, he even acquiesced to Americans seeing Buddhists objects as decorative, as long as they treated those items with respect. His main concern was with teaching "the Buddha dharma" and nonviolence, not with the nationality of his pupils.

Unfortunately, the popularity of Eastern religions and their accompanying items can lead to instances where no thought has been given to the original significance. Since these items are often divorced from their religious meaning or seen as a resource to plunder, generally little thought is given to their display. During his interview the professor of Asian Philosophy recounted that while he had yet to see it, a fellow Buddhist had walked into a local restaurant to find a large, wooden Buddha sitting on the bar. "That" explained the professor, who is also a practicing Buddhist, "I find a little bit offensive".

### **The Buddha on the Bar: Issues with Object Use**

Throughout my research I questioned whether the popularity of Buddhist and Hindu religious items was American co-optation of Asian religious symbols or if it was cultural diffusion, the result of the globalized, small world modernity has created. I see the availability of authentic Asian religious items within the US as the cultural diffusion of objects and ideas. Buddhism has long been adapted to fit the different cultures it is introduced to and it has undergone countless changes since its origination in India 2,500 years ago (Harvey, 1990:1). Western culture has also had a long introduction to both Buddhism and Hinduism. I see the availability of these items in the United States as another step in the spread of both religions but there are significant issues that arise from this. I have already explored how part of what draws some Americans to these objects are perceptions based in Orientalism, not a true understanding of either religion. This is not due to malice on the part of those individuals. Either they lack the resources to experience these cultures first hand or they don't feel obliged to conduct a vigorous study of the religions these items are derived from. Sometimes though they do end up doing some research out of curiosity and everyone I spoke with treated the Asian religious objects they owned with respect.

Many Americans are interested in Asian religions; this interest leads them to bring one or more religious items into their homes. While they may not practice the religions these items symbolize their perceptions and opinions about those religions are usually a factor in the purchase of such items. Not knowing much about the use of these objects, the majority of people find prominent places to display them and

then leave them there. I asked the Tibetan Lama what he thought of Americans using these items to decorate their homes and if he thought this was wrong. He replied:

Ah, decoration...I don't think very much [is] wrong. You can put decoration and you respect, even if you don't offer, but respect, but you don't sell. And decoration...um, people put decoration that's different ah, then what [do you] call it? Motivation, motivation. Because some of them they don't know how to take care of them, put in decoration.

I also asked the Professor of Asian Philosophy who is also a practicing Buddhist what he thought of the popularity of Buddhist items in the United States. He explained that:

I mean if it's done with some... Even if it's not necessarily done with a whole lot of knowledge, because often times even in Asia people don't know a lot of the ritual and philosophical grounding behind the use of different kinds of objects, like in the scholastic sense. But if it's done with respect, I don't particularly have a problem with it. It's when it's sort of appropriating other people's symbols from other religions and other people's cultures in disrespectful ways that I find a little more problematic.

Among the Americans I spoke to there was respect for the items, even among individuals who did not see them as religious. This respect was manifested in the specific meanings attributed to the objects and the thought put into their placement. The meanings attributed to the items resulted from individuals' perceptions of them, some of which were drawn from original religious meanings.

The story of the Buddha on the bar told by the professor of Asian Philosophy illustrates how just the location of a Buddha statue can be offensive to a Buddhist. It serves as an example of how the introduction of a religious object into an environment where little is known about it can result in offending those who hold it sacred. The American adoption of these religious items, symbols and ideas can lead

to misunderstandings and sometimes offence because most Americans only understand parts, not the whole.

Now at the conclusion of my research three issues stand out which I will highlight here. The first, as illustrated by the Buddha on the bar, is how American ignorance of religious rules pertaining to the use and display of Buddhist objects can lead to offence. The second is how the combination of Buddhist objects with other spiritual objects can be confusing and possibly offensive to Buddhists. Lastly, sometimes it is the availability of a Buddhist item to non-initiates which can go against traditional religious rules.

Before exploring these issues further we first need to look at the cause of these issues, the difference in the perception of these items between Americans and traditional Buddhists. Since the majority of the Asian religious items owned by Americans were of Buddhist origin I will focused on them and their cultural biographies in their traditional environments. In Buddhist countries there are traditional rules that govern how images of religious deities are displayed and how people use them. In addition there is a difference in how these religious objects, particularly images of Buddha and other Buddhist deities are perceived. Peter Harvey in his book on Buddhism writes:

In Northern and Eastern Buddhism, except perhaps in Ch'an / Zen, images function as more than reminders. They are seen as infused with the spirit and power of the being they represent. Moreover, as image and being 'meet' in both being ultimately 'thought-only' or emptiness, the image comes to be seen as the actual form of the being" (1990: 179).

It is this difference of perception about Buddhist representations of deities in Buddhist countries that leads to a different type of treatment of these items.

The Americans (except for orthodox Buddhists) who owned these religious items continually referred to them as reminders of a concept, mental state, or even a spiritual power, but the items were not seen as housing the essence of a deity. Also, in American culture these items are largely decorative. While emotional or intellectual significance is usually attributed to them, there is no active use of the object, this is not the case in the environments where these items originated. Harvey writes that “devotion to Buddhas and *Bodhisattvas* is focused or channeled by the use of various artefacts such as images” (1990: 170). An important difference between the cultural biography of these items in the United States and their native lands is how people interact with them. In Buddhist lands representations of the Buddha and other religious deities are bowed to, daily offerings are made to them, and they are revered.

While the Americans who were Buddhist were aware of this difference, many others I spoke with had little to no knowledge of the religious importance of these items or how they were used. Although this ignorance on the part of Americans can lead to misunderstandings, generally practicing Buddhists tolerated it. Linn was one of my last interviews. An American Buddhist who has studied with several different Buddhist teachers, including the Tibetan Lama I also interviewed, she not only owned Buddhist objects but used them daily in her religious devotions. I interviewed Linn at her apartment. As we sat in her living room she mused:

As Westerners it's kind of funny because we don't have much context for what is respectful treatment of these objects that are held in high esteem in other cultures. And most Asians are way too polite to ever say anything directly to people. The whole culture is very different. The fact that you, you will never tell somebody hey, you're doing that wrong.



The decoration of Linn's home was much along the lines of traditional Tibetan Buddhist rules. She explained that her windows were covered with large sheets to keep out negative energies as done in Tibet. Also the walls of her living room were decorated with several Buddhist religious tapestries or *tonkas*. Looking around the room I noticed several Buddhas of different styles sitting on shelves and high tables among the room. Linn explained that all were placed high enough that if a person was sitting in the room the Buddha would be above their heart. Linn also remarked that while aesthetics were a consideration, the placement of items she owned had been informed by what she had learned from her Buddhist teachers and their teachings. She explained that:

There are extensive teachings about how you should treat ritual objects or images, representations of enlightened body, speech and mind. So the Buddha is always supposed to go some place fairly high and if possible have a place of prominence in the room or a place of... you know what I mean? A high place, a clean place.

Among the Americans I spoke to there was respect for these items but very few were informed about the religions the items originated from. I have argued that this type of adoption with out knowledge is Orientalism. Many people seemed ignorant of the fact that these images and figures are actual representations of the gods and deities of others, with strict rules governing their treatment and display. Two of my informants had Buddha figures that they kept at low places. One sat under a tree in a garden and another on the floor in the corner of a house. As Linn stated, by tradition all figures of the Buddha should be kept in a high place of prominence. Neither person did it to be malevolent, they just thought the figures looked attractive where they had placed them.

A second issue I discovered was that many of the more spiritually leaning individuals I spoke with kept Buddhist items beside objects from other religions. I asked the Professor of Asian Philosophy what a typical Tibetan Buddhist would think of this religious mix. He explained that while most would not find it offensive they would find it a bit strange. He explained that:

My experience with Tibetans is they just kind of often times laugh this stuff off, like “Those bizarre Westerners, what are they going to do next?” You know? And I think they recognize that there’s no maliciousness in it it’s just kind of out of ignorance that we do this, out of ignorance of the traditions from which the images come. So, generally speaking I don’t think people really, Tibetans don’t really take offence to those kinds of things unless it’s on the bar, they might take offense. But mixing it up because the person doesn’t know the difference between Ganesha and the Buddha is probably less offensive.

The Professor of Asian philosophy also brought a more serious issue to my attention in respect to Asian religious items. There is the issue of items becoming available which are traditionally not suppose to be available to just anyone. He explained how certain *tonkas*, brightly colored tapestries of Buddhist deities are not meant for the eyes of all:

I think there’s a little bit of a question sometimes some of the tantric images of the wrathful deities and what not, are not meant to be displayed publicly. They’re only meant to be seen by people with initiation and those kinds of ritual requirements are disregarded on the tourist trade market. I could see some Tibetans taking offense to the way they’re displayed sometimes in the West, so openly. But as they say in Nepal, *kay gar nehy*, what to do...

As the examples provided have shown there are consequences resulting from the introduction of Asian religious and sacred items into American culture. Due to a difference in the way most Americans see these objects, as metaphorical or even decorative, these items are often taken out of their native context. On the whole most

Americans are unaware of these objects as divine images because they possess little or no true understanding of Buddhist dogma. For most the spiritualities of Asia are ripe for them to pick only those things which appeal to them without giving further thought to those parts they leave behind. It is this phenomenon which can be viewed as a modern incarnation of Orientalism. The ways in which we use, display and treat these items can be offensive or at least confusing to those who they traditionally belong to, who view them as physical manifestations of the divine.

If we view the American adoption of these objects as a new chapter in the cultural biography of these things, then it is natural that the introduction of these objects into a new environment would lead to new interpretations of and uses for them. While a convincing and strong argument can be made that Western consumption of these items and the presentation of Asian spirituality as a commodity is cultural appropriation, so too can it be argued that in the end this is cultural diffusion.

It is the spiritual nature of Asian religious items that leads to criticism of new interpretations and uses for these objects. More mundane objects when used in totally alien ways are less distressing. A Japanese friend of mine told of a trip to America where she had seen a young woman who had artfully put her hair up with a pair of chopsticks. For my friend this was comparable to sticking a fork through your hair. While humorous and strange, my friend was not offended by this use of chopsticks in any way. If we view Asian religious objects as objects then this leaves them open to the interpretation of their owners who singularize them in different ways. Since these

objects are often incorporated into their owners' projects of the self, the way they perceive these objects can be very individual.

Orientalism is a factor because we interpret these religions and the objects from them through a Western filter. But in general it is the nature, if often not the goal, of a religion to diffuse and convert new groups of people. Often adoption by new groups leads to religious mutation resulting in new practices, sects or as in the case of Catholicism in Haiti, new religions.

Unlike most of the religions of the world Buddhism is singular in the fact that it does not have to be the one and only religion of those who follow it. In Japan it is complementary to the indigenous Shinto religion and provides ceremonies and ritual such as funerals that Shinto lacks. Many informants referred to the Dali Lama and his pronouncement that Westerners were welcome to explore Buddhism without abandoning their traditional religions. It is the nature of Buddhist belief that makes the religion as a whole so malleable. Within this line of thinking about American adoption and mutation of Asian religion, new ways of using its practices and objects are expected.

There is another aspect to the presence of these objects in our culture; alternatively, introduction to these items can also lead to further understanding about them and the religions they are derived from. I have chosen to end this chapter with a story an informant told that illustrates this. Most of the individuals I spoke to owned a Buddhist item because on some level they had an interest in the religion or liked some of its concepts. Kirk, the college professor and world traveler provides an example of how owning a spiritual object can serve as an impetus to learn more about the religion

it came from, ultimately leading to further consideration of the importance of the symbol itself. As we sat in his office and talked Kirk pointed up to the shelves on his wood paneled, office wall singling out a carved Buddha made of sandalwood. South East Asian in appearance, the Buddha stood upright and thin, with a young, peaceful face and a pointed head dress. Kirk stood up and grabbed the Buddha bringing it over to me. He explained:

Um, and this one, I had this and I did do this once, because it's the peace Buddha. I had this plan of taking it; I was department chair at the time... Anyway, when I was in a meeting I was going to keep it in a bag and when things got really nasty I was going to stick this out and it's a symbol of a "okay guys lets stop engaging in warfare" kind of thing. And I did do that once, sort of stop peoples' attention. Get them to change their paradigm or at least stop what they're doing.

Somewhat shocked I asked "Was it successful?" To which he replied:

Yeah, yeah it was. And then as I started reading a little more about Buddhism and thinking more about it myself, as a personal source of inspiration. I decided I wouldn't do that because I thought it was disrespectful. Um, that it shouldn't be something you carry around and prop out and so forth. I decided against that and so it goes up here and I try to make...and it's actually supposed to be facing a certain way. So it's changed, before hand it was sort of a device, a prop would be the way I would describe it. I didn't want to use it as a prop.

That happened when I went to Miramar and I got to meet some people who were really devout Buddhists, whose goal in life was once they got to be about my age, was to shed all their material goods and go on a pilgrimage, and devote the last 3<sup>rd</sup> of their life totally to spiritual conscious raising. And I came away from that sort of feeling you know for a big 3<sup>rd</sup> of the world this is not a prop, this is something serious. And out of respect and personal interest in it I decided I wasn't going to do things like that.

Kirk story shows that not only are we changing the meanings of these objects; in the process these items have the ability to change us.

## **Chapter 5: Cultural Snap-shots of Asian Religious Objects**

When Kopytoff proposed the idea of the cultural biographies of things he imagined following an object from its creation until it reached its final resting place in a land fill or trash heap. My research of Asian religious items was limited to two specific times and places, as commodities inside stores and possessions inside the homes of those I spoke with. As such we can only see a snap-shot of the social life of these items in these two circumstances, not the whole life-span. These snap-shots are still rich and diverse as they are taken at two important points in the life of these items. The time they spend in small stores and once they reach the state of being a possession. Both of these states are particularly important because it is when these objects usually stop being total commodities and start their process of singularization.

A major factor in an object's biography is its relationship to the person in possession of it. The individual's religious/spiritual background, the knowledge they possess about these items, and why they have it, shapes their perception of, and subsequently their relationship with the item. For the majority of people I spoke with these are however loosely defined, spiritual items. For Buddhists, what tradition they belong to and its standing on the use of items and rules governing their use also came into play. These factors create a complex combination and as such there is not one overriding biography of these items. Perhaps a larger, random sample may achieve this, but I have decided to provide four cultural snap-shots of these items depicting their relationship to four different groups. Those groups are: Store Owners, Orthodox Buddhist, Spiritual Seekers/ Buddhist Hybrid, and Object as Novelty.

Figure 4. on the next page shows all twenty informants and the Asian religious items that they claimed to own.

Figure 4. Informants

Experts	Religious Affiliation	Age Range	Items Owned
Prof. of Asian Philosophy	Buddhist	35-50	Many Buddhist items
Tibetan Lama	Buddhist	50-65	Many Buddhist items
Zen teacher (Alice)	Buddhist	50-65	Many Buddhist items
<b>Shop owners and workers</b>			
Fiona (Red Canyon)	Buddhist/Jewish	50-65	Many Buddhist items (in home)
Jen (Blue Luna)	Wiccan	35-50	Kali tapestry, Buddha statues*
Phil (Magic Mist)	Spiritual	35-50	Buddhist and Hindu statues*
Rose (The Silver Owl)	Spiritual	50-65	Buddhist and Hindu statues* Many Buddhist items (in home)
Steven (Cloud Temple)	N/A	35-50	Buddhist statues and paintings of Buddha*
Valerie (The Silver Owl)	N/A	20-35	Wall scroll and Buddha statue (in home)
<b>Owners of Items</b>			
Alex	Buddhist	N/A	Buddha statues, Goddess statues Brass Shiva statue, Tibetan bowls
Becky	N/A	20-35	Tibetan prayer flags
Kayla	Buddhist/Catholic	N/A	22 Buddhist statues, Two Buddhist portrait posters
Kelly	Buddhist	N/A	Prayer flags, Buddha statue
Kirk	N/A	50-65	3 Buddha statues
Leah	Spiritual	35-50	Many Buddhist items
Lionel	Wiccan	35-50	Buddhist and Hindu statues, prayer flags, Kali painting and Shiva scarf
Linn	Buddhist	35-50	Tibetan prayer flags, Buddha statues, Ganesha carving, Tibetan singing bowl
Louise	N/A	20-35	Small statue of Ganesha, Ganesha mask made of metal
Mary	Bahai	50-65	Many statues, prayer flags, charcoal drawing, calligraphy paintings
Robert	N/A	50-65	Tibetan prayer flags, Buddha



## **Store Owners**

Since these objects start off in the market place, I will start with the relationship that those who sell these objects have to them. I conducted my research in local stores that sold Buddhist and Hindu statues, prayer flags and other Asian religious items. While these items can be found at diverse locations such as Target, Pier One Imports, and home and garden stores, I focused on small, privately owned stores within my town. This was because at larger department stores items influenced or from Asian religions were greatly outnumbered by regular items. Also, I concluded from preliminary visits to a Target store that store workers lacked knowledge about these items and the customers who purchased them.

While store owners and employees may have more personal relationships with their own items at home, here I am concerned with the object as commodity and its social life within stores. First I provide profiles of each store and those working there followed by a snap-shot of the biography of that item in that space and time.

### *Profile 1: Blue Luna*

Blue Luna is not within the main town I conducted the majority of my research in. It is thirty minutes north in a small, economically challenged, blue collar town. It was all but deserted the afternoon I dropped by. The store which owner Jen refers to as “a gift shop with pagan influences” is connected to a satellite dish business that her parents own. Jen side of the business consists of two large rooms. The front room is mainly a gift shop with among other things, cat themed kitchenware and the large, glass jewelry case that the register sits on top of. The New Age and Wiccan items are

located in the adjacent room at the back of the store. For Jen it was important that her store be affordable she explained “I just wanted to offer stuff that you know, some things I enjoy and try and give everybody a good deal”.

### *Profile 2: Cloud Temple*

Located in a quiet part of town, Cloud Temple specializes in upscale Asian décor and decorative lighting. Compared to the other stores I visited the Asian religious objects there are much greater in scale and in cost. The large space of the store is split between a front lighting section where lamps and chandeliers hang, with the rest being a home store featuring expensive furniture and Asian decorative items. Paintings and statues of the Buddha appear throughout; the most impressive being two Thai Buddhas that stand four feet tall. The store owner Steven explained that his shop had grown from his own love and familiarity with Thailand. He explained “Really what it was about was me wanting to create a beautiful space that reflected my own aesthetic and cultural beliefs and obviously the influences of my own background”.

While the store had had success when it first opened, the last two years have not been so prosperous. Steven attributed some of this to construction on the neighboring building that had started during that time. He also felt that the customers who had first supported the store had either lost interest or already purchase all they plan to. Due to this lack of sales in furniture and décor he has started to put more emphasis on lighting.

*Profile 3: Magic Mist*

Phil is the owner of Magic Mist a metaphysical bookstore which he has owned for ten years. Besides books he also sells a few Native American items, small Buddhist and Hindu statues and a selection of crystals. The store is in a Victorian house located off of a main road leading into town. Although the major road in front is always busy, the adjoining sidewalk does not see a lot of foot traffic. The store is on the ground level of the house where Phil and his wife make their home. In other rooms connected to the store they provide services such as psychic readings, dream therapy, and massage. The main two rooms of the store are somewhat narrow and cluttered with books and sale items.

From talking to Phil it seems that the services offered more so than any of the items, provide the main income for the store. Phil described the items in his store as such: “We have a fair amount of books and a fair amount of cards, and then we have a lot of candles and incense and statuary, small stuff”.

*Profile 4: Red Canyon*

Red Canyon is about an hour south in a nearby city that is known for the liberal nature of the people who live there. The store has been open and owned by the same woman for twenty years. I was able to speak with Fiona when I visited there. Fiona has known the owner of the store and been a patron there since its opening. She has been in the mental health field for 25 years and has been working at the store for four years. When I asked Fiona about the shop and its goals she explained that the mission statement was to “promote sacredness and connection with spirituality”. She

qualified this with the understanding that “no object is going to make a person a more spiritual person. But the intention of having objects represents a connection with a spiritual component to help people to honor what is sacred”.

The store has a warm, pleasant feel due to its natural, woodsy interior and artful presentation of the merchandise. A diverse array of objects such as books, candles, religious statuary, tarot cards, yoga mats and supplies, soaps, lotions and jewelry can be found at different corners of the store. Items from many different religions are equally available. I asked Fiona about the store’s religious diversity and whether it was intentional, to which she replied: “The intention is to construct a place that is multi-faceted because there is no one path that we’re here to serve”.

#### *Profile 5: The Silver Owl*

The Silver Owl is a boutique in the downtown of the college town in which I live. Rose, the proprietor carries an assortment of expensive, designer clothing, jewelry, Buddhist and other religious objects of art, and exotic decorative items from all over the globe in her store. She has the store organized into little sections with the Buddhist and Hindu items at the front of the store by a window. Near the front door the main floor of the store is given up to racks of clothing. I also interviewed Valerie who is in her early twenties and works part time at the store. With in the past few years Rose has made the decision to carry more clothing and less decorative items as people buy clothing more often then they do home goods.

Rose was very critical of the commercialization of Asian religious products and the availability of similar things at discount stores like Target. She believes she

understands the significance of the Asian religious items she carries and feels an obligation to purchase them from valid sources.

*Snap-shot: The Childhood of an Asian Religious Object*

Like a summer fling the relationship that store owners and workers have with the Asian religious items on their shelves is only temporary, as these items are still for sale. While those working in these stores might attribute meaning to an item it lacks individualization. As if the item was one of a group of identical sextuplets, there is no way to tell it from its brothers and sisters. It is the presence of these items and others like it en-mass that supplies the function and power of these objects.

Although most of the Buddhas, prayer flags and statues of Hindu gods and goddesses live only temporarily in these stores, this does not negate the role they play in the identity of these stores and subsequently that of store owners. Larger objects, such as a life size Thai Buddha in Steven's store, may even become permanent fixtures in these spaces due to their high price tags. Whether these objects are long term residents or only there for a week, they are a part of what establishes the identity of the store and its owner.

In the US these are still unusual objects and in these stores there may be twenty different Buddhas along side large statues of Guan Yin that stand peacefully under rows of prayer flags hanging from the ceiling. Often these items are combined in a mix and match of objects from other spiritualities. Because of this combination of exotic items, these stores are exciting, yet ethereal places to be. Perhaps it is this

atmosphere that those who purchase these items for their “good energy” are trying to recreate.

The New Age stores and boutiques I visited were either owned by one individual or in one case a couple. The items that find their way into these stores usually do so because they appeal to the store owner, although sometimes this is only aesthetically. Like a proud parent, store owners take pride in the unique and beautiful items that make up their stores. There were different levels of knowledge about these items; store owners who had ties to Asian countries possessed the most knowledge about the background of the items. Like dotting parents they would tell where the item had come from and what its significance was.

For owners their stores are their lives, to some extent their souls, a location beside their own homes in which to engage in the reflexive project of the self. For example Steven had spent a significant amount of time in Thailand and was enamored with its culture. The country's presence is strongly felt in Steven's beautiful show room inside Cloud Temple, full of various Buddha statues and furniture from that country. Rose's store The Silver Owl was full of the exotic and fashionable clothes she liked to wear, imported items from the countries she often visited, and religious objects that reflected her spiritual nature.

The small stores project the personalities of those that own them. In some ways the items within have been singularized to an extent by the store owner's decision to carry them. These stores provide what I believe is an example of the half way point between singularization and commoditization. While the state of true ownership or total singularization has yet to be reached, these items function as

building blocks in the identity of the store which in turn reflects the identity of the store owners. It is for this reason I believe many owners who themselves sold Asian religious objects were critical of the availability of these item at large department store like Target. In some way or another they connect Asian religious objects to their self identities and subsequently to that of their store. As such it is okay for them to sell these things but not for an impersonal department store owned by a large corporation.

Comparable to childhood for Asian religious objects this state does not last forever. As most of us grow up, get a job and get married so too must a Buddha statue reach a state of more permanent singularization. This is achieved once the statue captures the attention of a shopper and is bought. Then a new chapter in the object's biography will start, one that to some extent depends just as much on the person who bought it, as on the actual object.

### **Orthodox Buddhist**

The majority of these individuals came from what I saw as my "expert" group. These people are Buddhist, and I refer to them as orthodox as they expressed Buddhism as their only religion and follow its traditional rules. Within this category we find the Tibetan Lama, Lora, Alice the Zen teacher, and probably the Professor of Asian Philosophy. As Buddhists they have Buddhist objects and for them these objects have functions. Central to this group is an in-depth understanding of these objects and use of them in everyday rituals. The Tibetan Lama was the only expert who was a native of a traditionally Buddhist country. The Professor of Asian Philosophy had lived both in Tibet and Tibetan refugee communities in Nepal and India for extensive

amounts of time. Alice, the Zen teacher, has knowledge of Buddhism which spans thirty years. Lora is a devoted student of Tibetan Buddhism and has been a student of the Lama. This group probably perceives these objects in a way that is most similar to the perceptions that native Buddhists have of these objects.

*Profile 1: The Tibetan Lama*

I interviewed the Lama in his living room as his wife cleaned and cooked rice in the kitchen. The living room we sat in was full of shrines created on shelves filled with ornate Buddhas in different styles. The Lama and his wife were both friendly and welcoming. Besides a vest that Lama wore which looked faintly Tibetan, both wore Western clothing. Both also seemed to be somewhere in their fifties. The Lama was worried about his English and although he lost me at a few points, I was able to follow the majority of the interview, which proved to be very informative. I was surprised to find the Lama much more embracing of the Western adoption of Buddhist items than I was expecting.

*Profile 2: Zen Teacher*

Alice's introduction to Buddhism came thirty-five years ago when "Born in Tibet" a book by Chogyam Trungpa "fell on her nose". While her home also serves as her office and worship space for the Zen circle she leads, it was a welcoming space. The room we sat in for the interview was serene with a feeling of formality, due perhaps to the simple and sparse furnishings. During the interview Alice spoke in a measured, calm tone and radiated a presence of empathy and understanding.



*Profile 3: Linn*

Linn works as a scientist and in the brief hour I spent with her struck me as the kind of person who is always moving, always going. Buddhism provides her with a way to quiet her ever-working mind. I interviewed Linn at her home and was surprised to find it decorated similarly to the Tibetan Lama. Linn is a serious follower of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, a fact materialized in the décor of her home.

*Profile 4: Professor of Asian Philosophy*

As part of my research I also interviewed a professor of Asian Philosophy for background information on Buddhist items and his views on their popularity here in the United States. Although I was aware that he is also a practicing Buddhist, I did not ask him about his personal practice. This was because I was more concerned with learning about where these items had come from and how they were used in their native lands. I was also quite curious to hear his view on their recent popularity here in the United States.

*Snap-shot: The Buddhist Object as Teacher*

For Orthodox Buddhists, the Asian religious items they own, which are almost always only Buddhist items, are inanimate teachers. As the Lama's comparison of Buddhist objects to baby food demonstrated, for this group Buddhist items can function as mediating devices. They teach and also help Buddhists with a task, such as meditation or as with images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, are representations of

the divine teacher. Linn referred to the latter as “representations of enlightened body, speech and mind”.

The meanings of these objects are centered in the Buddhist religion with objects signifying concepts and ideas of Buddhism. While individuals may ascribe personal meanings only relevant to them, there are traditional understandings of what these objects are, what they mean and how you treat them. Orthodox Buddhists know of these understanding through their religious study and honor them. Generally in Buddhism all teachers, even those that are inanimate, should be treated with respect.

In the homes of the Buddhists I visited there were only Buddhist objects. This makes sense as these people strictly followed Buddhism and do not combine it with other religious traditions. Although most had a specific Buddhist tradition they followed, there was incorporation of Buddhist objects from different traditions. This was mostly seen in people owning different images of the Buddha from different lands. Like a collection of long lost cousins at a family reunion, Buddha statues from different lands sit together on shelves in Buddhist homes. The Tibetan Lama for example owned Buddhas from South East Asia. Objects functioned to identify that the individual was indeed a Buddhist but less what type of Buddhist.

Since some of these items like *malas*, Buddhist prayer beads, are functional, Buddhists had an actual reason to purchase them. I would assume this leads them to rely less on concepts like hierophany, where an item reveals its magical nature to them. Maybe the utility of the item builds trust between owner and object and less convincing is needed to bring about its purchase?

For Buddhists relationships to certain objects may still be very intense, as they are seen as the embodiment of the divine. Linn's inanimate teacher, an image of the Buddhist goddess Tara hangs on a wall. There the goddess sits waiting for the time when Linn will chant prayers to her and she can lead Linn through her meditations. . In general images of divine beings were used as focuses for meditation which was seen as central to understanding Buddhist practice. Because of this Buddhist have more interaction with and pay more attention to items as they are purposeful, not just decorative metaphors.

Ironically, it is the Buddhist's philosophy of trying to free one's self from material things which alters the relationship an orthodox Buddhist has with these items. As we have seen for Buddhist more so than other groups, these objects are mediating devices and at some point may complete their function. As the Zen teacher explained, when she first started her practice the items meant a lot to her. Asian religious objects at this point in their biography may be tied deeply to the owner's reflexive projects of the self. But as an individual furthers their religious study the objects, having been successful in teaching their lesson, are not needed anymore. After a Buddhist successfully internalizes the lesson of an object it is less important to their identity. Orthodox Buddhist may then find as the Zen teacher did, that the objects are no longer needed. At this point a Buddhist object, just like a Buddhist monk who has been successful spreading the word of Buddha in a new land, will move on to the next place.

## **Spiritual Seekers**

This is the largest and most eclectic group. It includes individuals like Mary, Lynn and Lionel, who could be labeled New Age. These people own Asian spiritual items because they see themselves as deeply spiritual people and like to surround themselves with reminders of that. This group also included others like Kirk who had an intellectual curiosity in Asian religions and the cultures they come from. For Kirk and others like him their ownership of Asian religious objects served to prove this. I have also included hybrid Buddhists such as Fiona, who combine Buddhism with other spiritualities. I see this combination as having more in common with self-directed spirituality than traditional Buddhism. Also, I suspect Buddhist rules and traditions shape the lives of Buddhist hybrids less than they do for orthodox Buddhists.

There is great diversity in this category as knowledge and perceptions of Asian religious items differ by individuals. This is because this group is centered on self-directed spirituality. Some generalities can be made though on the way these items are perceived, used, and the general nature of the relationship people have to them.

### *Profile 1: Kirk*

Kirk is a successful college professor in his 50's. He has been lucky enough to have traveled the world extensively. He keeps two different statues of the Buddha in his office, as not only mementos of trips he has taken, but also as daily inspiration. He admits that part of what attracted him to the items he displays in his office were that they presented the image of a world traveler and adventurer. He has come to have

more respect for the Buddhist objects he owns as he has learned more about them from his travels to Buddhist lands and talking with Buddhists.

*Profile 2: Leah*

Leah is a Yoga instructor and as such has a general understanding of Indian spirituality that applies to Yoga. I knew of her Asian religious items because I go to her Yoga studio. I was surprised to learn that in the past Leah had conducted her own study into religion and spirituality. Like others, Leah combined spiritual items from several different religions. She described some of the objects she owned as “simple beautiful reminders”.

*Profile 3: Lionel*

Lionel is the typical, middle age, New Age man. His age appeared to be somewhere between the mid-forties and early fifties. He wears glasses and had a thin beard and gray, longish hair. He was very expressive about his personal beliefs and heavily identified as a Pagan, he is even an ordained Pagan priest. He expressed a spiritual calling to the Hindu Goddess Kali. Lionel was somewhat exceptional for the fact that he was one of the few people who prayed to the many religious items he kept on the altars in his home.

*Profile 4: Mary*

Mary is in her late fifties and has three grown daughters. She walks with a cane and wears a gray fedora. She has a very idiosyncratic look with wild, gray hair

and loose fitting clothing on her squat frame. Mary started her spiritual, countercultural journey in the 60's and is still on it. After trying out many different religions she has decided to join the Bahā'i who believe that all religions are an evolution to the current Bahā'i faith. In the past she played folk music but decided to stop due to the morose nature of the lyrics, her hobby now is crocheting lace mandalas of her own design.

*Snap-shot: The Great Love Affair*

The biography of Asian religious objects in the possession of spiritual seekers is comparable to an intense love affair. Within this biography we see the active consumption of spiritual objects as a major element in the reflexive project of the self. This is because what the object stands for and its significance is almost totally at the discretion of its owner. For most in this group Asian religious objects have little, or no practical use so they are viewed as symbolic metaphors. For these individuals statues of the Buddha or Shiva, prayer flags, and Guan Yin become metaphors of personal goals, issues to be overcome, and the forces these people seek to control.

This love affair starts within the shopping scenario with singularization being manifested in some of its most intense forms. The shopper takes one look at a peaceful Buddha and Belk's concepts of objectification and hierophany start to do their work. Shoppers recognize in the item the objectification of an idea or belief they want to incorporate into their lives. The item calls to the shopper or gets their attention in some way. As if speaking to the shopper, the item tells them that this is a relationship that is meant to be. Sometimes shoppers do set out with a particular item in mind but

they then rely on the universe to reveal what item is the right item to bring into their lives.

Spiritual seekers function within a hybrid mix of spiritual beliefs and different religions, thus the objects from them all are up for grabs. A statue of the Buddha may find itself surrounded by dream catchers, Norse runes, and objects from many other spiritualities. The amount of religious paraphernalia might be such that a Buddha owned by these individuals might think it has been incorporated into a religious museum, not a private residence.

Here we also find Orientalism in the mystical meanings attributed to these objects and their status as a spiritual resource to the West. Since spiritual seekers chose indiscriminately from a plethora of spiritual traditions, those items they end up with tend to be deeply important and rooted in their self-concepts. Asian religious objects are usually recognized as spiritual, but for most the meanings they attribute to them are either from a shallow knowledge of Buddhism or self determined. In many cases these objects are biographical, but for those who have engaged in travel the significance may be more tied to the culture the item came from than the actual religion.

The meanings attributed to Asian religious objects have just as much to do with the identity of those who own them than with any inherent meaning they may possess. The object functions as a sort of mirror that reflects back the meanings the owner wants to see in it. An example is found in Lionel who owned several items depicting Hindu gods. He interpreted the Hindu god Shiva as a less threatening form of masculinity. He explained “you know he’s known as the dancing god, very non-

patriarchal, non-western image of a male deity”. Because Lionel himself was far different from the traditional Western images of masculinity, his perception of Shiva reflected his own identity as much as any traditional belief. A chart of some of the meaning this group attributed to Asian religious items can be seen below as figure 5.

Figure 5. Symbolic Meanings Attributed to Asian Religious Items

<i>Buddha statue</i>	<i>Guan Yin statue</i>	<i>Buddhist Prayer Flags</i>	<i>Singing Bowl</i>	<i>Spiritual Items in General</i>
<b>Connection to the earth</b>	Mothering	Individuality	Divine guidance	Reminder to be present
<b>Transcendence over fear</b>	<b>Compassion</b>	Connection to divine source	Reminder to relax	<b>Healing</b>
<b>Purity</b>	<b>Femininity</b>	Nature	Be present	<b>Cultured/Well Traveled</b>
<b>Transformation</b>	Gutsy	Blessings		Protection
Peace	Peacefulness			<b>Gratitude</b>
<b>Impermanence</b>				<b>Call to be mindful</b>
Masculinity				<b>Reminder of spiritual path</b>
<b>Protection</b>				<b>Prosperity</b>
<b>Cleansing</b>				

Words in bold were mentioned by more than one member of this group.



Asian religious objects provide a way for spiritual seekers to pursue their desire for spirituality, holistic healing, and becoming a better person. These are the goals within New Age spirituality and also fit well within Giddens's concept of the reflexive project of the self. Like the relationship these objects have with Buddhists, for some spiritual seekers these objects can also come to be their teachers. Besides their functions as objectifications of concepts, or identity markers, these items can also be mediating devices. Like Buddhists, many in this category mentioned use of objects in meditation which was the main form of active object use.

For most their relationship with these objects is a permanent one, The Buddhas and Guan Yin statues take up a permanent residence on a shelf somewhere in their home or office. Unlike the group that comes below, these are significant objects that generally owners don't lose interest in. Though the ways may differ, these items have been singularized and in some cases to the extreme. For orthodox Buddhists, objects are seen as sacred because they are physical manifestations of a divine idea. This is also the case with spiritual seekers. The difference is that for the spiritual seekers, it is the divine as personally interpreted and constructed by them. It is this reinterpretation of meaning that makes the relationship between Asian religious objects and spiritual seekers so intense. These objects come to be a sort of inanimate soul mate that offers support and meaning to the lives of those who own them.

**Asian Religious Items as a Novelty**

Finally, there are those who bought an Asian spiritual item for the simple fact that they liked the way it looked. This group was the most problematic to pin down and understanding their motivations was even harder. People within this group made these purchases with no knowledge of the item and with little interest in knowing more. Within this group there were also cases of people receiving these items as a gift and not knowing much about them and being absolutely fine with that; Robert and his prayer flags are one such example. While some meaning might be attributed to the object there was usually not much emotional investment in it.

*Profile 1: Becky*

Becky, at 21, was the youngest person I interviewed. Unlike the majority of people I spoke with, Becky did not have a spiritual reason for owning the Asian religious items she had. Basically, she bought them because she liked the way they looked. Originally she knew nothing about Tibetan prayer flags when she purchased them from a natural foods store. After she bought them, she researched them on Wikipedia to learn more.

*Profile 2: Louise*

Louise uttered my favorite comment out of everyone. Of the two figures of Ganesha she owned she explained “It means what I want it to mean”. Louise bought the first item at an outdoor market with no knowledge of what it was. She thinks she bought it because she likes elephants, which is what the Hindu god Ganesha looks

like. While she had done a little research about Ganesha after buying the first figure years ago, she had forgotten its meaning when I spoke to her. She did connect a sense of protection to both and held a weak hope that they had the ability to keep negative forces away. Because of this, one is placed on a wall by her front door and the other one is placed in her bedroom.

*Profile 3: Robert*

Robert was a bit of a grumpy old man. He loathed religion in every form so it was somewhat strange he had Tibetan prayer flags hanging in front of his home. Robert was one of the only people I spoke with who had been given the Asian religious items he owned. He had inherited a Buddha statue from his daughter who also given him the prayer flags for Christmas one year. Robert stressed that he liked the prayer flags because they were colorful and different. He vehemently claimed that they held no spiritual significance for him.

*Snap-shot: My New Buddy Buddha*

Within the last group we find a biography of these items that is comparable to a casual friendship. This may be an enduring relationship but generally since the level of emotional investment is low, it tends not to be. For this group there is no or very little concern with the spiritual nature of the item. It is its difference or novelty that is most attractive. The item is singularized in its state as a novelty but there is a chance it may end back up as a commodity.

Like spiritual seekers the meaning of the items resides in the perception that the owner has of it. But unlike the seekers, the purchase of the items was not fraught with significance. People who view Asian religious items as a sort of novelty buy them for aesthetic reasons. There is just something about the objects that appeals to them but unlike spiritual seekers, the objects does not represent the solution to a problem in their life. People explained they bought it because they liked it, thought it was pretty, or someone gave it to them. Since these items are not connected to a spiritual or conceptual idea it is harder to relate their possession to Giddens's reflexive project of the self. For those who were given these objects as a gift, the objects may represent that social connection in some way.

For some the object did spark a curiosity in the owner about the object's original meaning. Becky, a college student, had impulsively bought Tibetan prayer flags after seeing them in a friend's home. Not knowing much about her purchase she searched for information about them on the internet. She explained "I didn't want to just own them and not know exactly what they were". Louise had also researched Ganesha on the internet after she bought her first image of the Hindu god. Like a casual friendship where people never share the intimate details of their lives, a deep understanding of these objects never develops. For both Becky and Louise their initial superficial research was all they ever conducted.

It is the adoption of Asian religious objects by this group that those who belong to the other three groups above would criticize as commercialization. This is because unlike the other groups who connect these objects to their self identities, for this group there is little or no personal investment in the objects. In some ways it is

also the weak state of singularization as a novelty that offends those who see these objects as so much more. Lastly, the precarious nature of novelty may also distress those who see these as spiritual objects. As novelty fades those who own these objects have little reason to keep them.

It is probably this group that the Zen teacher remarked will eventually retire their Buddhas to the basement. For a time the Buddha may languish in the dark in its undignified and cold surroundings. Then maybe during spring cleaning the object will end up in a pile for Goodwill or a yard sale. It moves on, perhaps now with its varnish cracking or a chip or too on its surface, to its next owner.

### **Reflections on a Phenomenon**

I have presented four different biographies that Asian religious items might experience in their lifetime. There are perhaps many more possible biographies than these but these were the four that emerged from my data. The variety of these stories resides in the diversity of ways these items are perceived in the United States. On the most part these are seen as significant items but the reason for their significance differs from group to group. Except for those who purchase these items as a novelty, these are singular items and often important tools in the reflexive project of the self.

High modernity has brought new possibilities and variety to the life stories that these objects can have. Globalization makes it possible that these objects can have a biography based within a suburban home in Texas. Modernity also makes it possible that through peoples' projects of the self new meanings can be attributed to these items. A Buddha may now come to stand for more personal forms of

enlightenment, such as an ultimate goal of sobriety for an alcoholic. Modernity as increased our options in who we can be and how we want others to see us, it has also done the same for these objects.

Asian religious objects are greatly at the mercy those who own them and their personal investment into these objects. Within this time and place the fates of these objects are not only diverse, they can also be precarious. Statues of the Buddha now reside not only in shrines and the homes of devotees, they may also find themselves in offices, bathrooms, backyards and basements. The modern world allows for Asian religious objects a multitude of cultural biographies. In some of these stories these items are seen as representations of gods or the divine, in others they are simply knickknacks.

There is one last phenomenon that should be mentioned. Just as Asian religious objects are in a process of change, moving from a commodity to a singular possession, so too are we in a process of change. Many of the Buddhists I spoke with had started out as spiritual seekers who eventually decided Buddhism was the correct path for them. Kirk who I've included as a spiritual seeker originally bought his first Buddha more as a novelty. In these scenarios we see Giddens reflexive project of the self and a positive way in which material culture can be a tool in that process.

## Conclusion

This study has explored the various cultural biographies of Asian religious objects as owned by Americans. I have shown that various life stories are possible for these objects with the overwhelming factor being the relationship between object and owner. Through their ownership of Asian religious items Americans are engaging in the reflexive project of the self.

Modernity has brought an end to a general belief in the nature of man. Because of this we find ourselves in an existential crisis to understand who we are and perceive meaning in our lives. Seeking self-actualization, we begin, according to Anthony Giddens, a reflexive project of the self. Giddens has stated doubts about consumption functioning as a vehicle in the reflexive project of the self. This study builds upon Giddens concept of the reflexive project of the self and shows how material objects can be tools in these projects. It also further adds to the literature of material culture with its addition of the use of spiritual items as a means of expression (McCracken 2003; Miller 2006 Tilley 2006).

Web Keane has written: “Without in any way determining their cultural significance, objects may nonetheless be important vehicles of transformative pressure on, or provide openings to new possibilities for systems of meaning and of pragmatic action” (2006: 200). As Keane states objects are culturally important because they provide “systems of meaning”. These meanings are created through a process of singularization. Some things are singularized by culture, but in our modern world much is left to the individual to decide.

Within this thesis I have explored different theories of singularization. This study adds to the literature (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988; Morin in Hoskins 2006; Belk et al. 1989) on this subject by showing how various theories of emotional investment into objects fits within Kopytoff's framework of singularization. Whether an object is biographical, an heirloom, or a gift we have singularized it through a process of emotional investment which connects us to it.

The fact that Asian religious objects are spiritual in nature cannot be ignored. Modernity has altered religion; it has eroded the power of Western religious institutions and led to a movement toward self-directed spirituality. This study also complements previous studies on spiritual goods (Mears and Ellison. 2000; Zaidman 2003) and expands them by exploring their use as tools in the reflexive project of the self. Asian religious objects are a way in which to make spiritual concepts material. For most these objects hold positive meanings that relate to ideas of peace, balance and compassion. Because they are such significant items for most, they can be mediating devices either through their use in meditation or simply as a symbol to reflection on.

Secularization and the movement to self-directed spirituality in the West has increased the presence of Asian religions in our culture. For the people I spoke with Asian religions and the items from those religions provided not only an alternative but a reverse to the traditional religions they had been raised with. This was evident in an overly positive view of Buddhism that I discovered was common among informants, a view based in Orientalism.



This study also presents a unique interpretation of Edward Said (1977) concept of Orientalism. The Orientalism Said originally wrote about was based on a negative Western view of the East. I have shown in this study that what at first may appear a positive perception of the East, can also be an example of Orientalism. In the case of my study this was due to the fact that except for Buddhists, most people did not possess any informed knowledge about Buddhism, whether through reading, travel, or study. Their understandings were based on a Western perception of Buddhism that homogenized a diverse and complicated religion. Most importantly, they saw Buddhism as a resource from which they could take what they found appealing and discard the rest. Another way in which Orientalism manifested even among some Buddhist was in an idealization of Buddhist cultures which ignored the social issues of those countries.

The problem of Orientalism does raise uncomfortable issues of cultural appropriation which have been raised by both Aldred (2000) and York (2001). This study disagrees with their negative view of what they see as Western New Age spirituality's appropriation from the religious traditions of other cultures. While negative factors that shape American perceptions of these objects and the religions they are from should be acknowledged, I do not believe that on the whole [or in general] what is happening is cultural co-optation. I believe that the overriding force in this process is cultural diffusion fueled by globalization. This conclusion is based on the fact that religion in general diffuses. Also, as far as Buddhism is concerned, there is a long history of reinterpretation of the religion when introduced to new environments. This study concurs with more positive views of the incorporation of

Asian religions into Western spirituality as expressed by Bowman (1999) and Klassen (2005).

Towards the end of this thesis I have examined the commercialization of these objects. Many of the people I spoke with, even those who sell these objects themselves, expressed reservations about the recent availability and popularity of these things. This is a phenomenon I believe relates back to Kopytoff's idea of singularization and its opposite state, commoditization.

This study has built upon Kopytoff theory of commoditization as a process (1988). His work focused on objects that have either been singularized or those that are pure commodities. I believe that criticism of the commercialization of these items stems from a perception that others are not singularizing these objects at all or in many cases, not enough. This study adds to Kopytoff's previous work to show that objects can be singularized to different degrees. The difference between the degrees of singularization shown to an objects can be the difference between appropriation and respectful borrowing. If the degrees of singularization are similar between those who originally owned an item and those who are borrowing it, then conflict is less. Larger difference can make cultural diffusion seem like cultural co-optation.

One example can be found in the negative perceptions Buddhists and spiritual seekers held of those who thought of these items as a novelty. For Buddhist and others who perceive these as spiritual items these are significant markers of their identities or projects of the self. In most cases these items were less significant and as such less a part of the projects of the self for those who bought them for aesthetic reasons. A similar dynamic can be found in the opinions of small store owners who

themselves play a role in turning these objects into commodities, but were critical of the recent commercialization of these objects.

I believe that for owners of small, private stores these places also function as one manifestation of their projects of the self. Their stores reflect their own personal taste and past experiences. The objects that they carry in their stores are the building blocks of these spaces. The inclusion of these items as part of the store singularizes them. While this level of singularization is not as strong as that of true ownership, the objects' connection to the store also connects it to the identity of the individual who owns the store. The inclusion of these items and similar ones into large, impersonal stores devalues the object and furthermore that of the small store owners. This results in a stance that they have a right to sell these objects as they understand them, but more impersonal forms of commerce are wrong.

In this study I have combined and built upon both Kopytoff and Giddens' theories. This study shows the different ways in which Asian religious items are singularized and how this relates back to the reflexive projects of the self of those who own them. The diversity of these projects creates a variety in the meanings attributed to these items and in the ways they are used. These factors result in a multiplicity of different relationships that people can have with Asian religious objects. It is this relationship which in turn shapes the cultural biography—or perhaps we must say biographies-- of these items. Kopytoff writes that:

In the homogenized world of commodities, an eventful biography of a thing becomes the story of various singularizations of it, of classifications and the reclassifications in an uncertain world of categories whose importance shifts with every minor change in context (1988:90).

Due to the limitations of this study I have only been able to focus on a specific time and place in the lifecycles of these items. I compare what I have been able to create to a snap-shot, true to specific circumstances only. Even within this limited scope there is diversity in the stories of these items, proving that Asian religious items have eventful biographies indeed.

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