

The Politics of Writing Instruments: How Transnational Commodities Construct Chinese Nationalism, 1894-1938

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Introduction

Scholars of nationalism have long emphasized the role of objects in sustaining nationalism (Anderson 2006[1983]; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). As the materialization of the imagined community, “national matters” render the nation concrete and tangible (Edensor 2020; Zubrzycki 2017). Theoretically, investigating the role of material objects in stabilizing and expressing nationalism can deepen our understanding of how objects function as political resources that can “naturalize” existing political order (Greenland 2013; Molnar 2016). In this study, however, I aim to examine the relationship between nationalism and materiality from a reverse direction. Rather than asking how nationalism, as a well-established ideology, *enlists* material objects to legitimize itself, I aim to explore how material objects actively engage in the historical *construction* of nationalism.

The literature on economic nationalism comprises a body of research that affirms the role of a particular type of object—commodities—in mobilizing national sentiments. In examples of economic nationalism, foreign commodities often provoke anti-foreign sentiment, while domestically produced goods can foster national pride (Pryke 2012). However, economic nationalism is often treated as originating in economic thought, such as List’s theory of the “national economy” or Hamilton’s theory of protectionism. (Helleiner 2002; Nakano 2004; Wraight 2022). In these literatures, commodities are treated merely as constituents of the national economy; they are stripped of their concrete materiality and “take on the appearance of an abstract, nonmaterial form” (Mitchell and Steinmetz 1999:77). In short, the materiality of commodities is largely neglected.

In this study, I will also examine material objects through the lens of commodities. Departing from the literature on economic nationalism, however, I do not focus on the genealogy of economic thought or doctrinal debates over the national economy. Instead, I foreground the circulation, use, and cultural functioning of concrete commodities, asking how their material presence and social meanings actively participate in the historical construction of nationalism.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a culturalist understanding of the nation. By nation, I mean an autonomous political community whose members share a common culture, legal rights, and economy, and which has clear territorial boundaries and relates to other nations on the basis of sovereign equality (Smith 1991:14). Historically, nationalism is primarily a “modern construction” that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, arising “out of as well as against” the large cultural systems that preceded it (Anderson [1983] 2006:12). Accordingly, examining the construction of nationalism also requires attention to the factors that contributed to the collapse of these earlier cultural systems.

To investigate how objects are engaged in the historical construction of nationalism, I adopt the “social life of things” approach, which examines the social implications of objects by following their trajectories across different social domains (Appadurai 1986). This study focuses on three different domains:

Domain of Market: Markets can be understood as vast networks of interconnected nodes, each functioning as a center of profit and calculation (Latour 1993: 121; Callon 1998). Economic power, in this context, is the ability to reconfigure spatial arrangements to create broader networks of circulation (Braudel 1992: 184). Changes in such networks can alter the distributional availability of objects, which may “have profound effect on meaning systems” (McDonnell 2023: 213). I argue that such changes in availability open the possibility for cultural transformation—specifically, the construction of nationalism.

Domain of Everyday Use: Pragmatism conceives the meaning-making process as emerging from practical interactions with the surrounding environment (Dewey 2007). Objects are constitutive elements of practice. Through embodied activity, they become intertwined with human actors and help anchor and routinize cultural understandings (Schatzki 2010; Lizardo and Strand 2010). I argue that material objects can destabilize existing cultural habits and foster new ones, thereby providing the “banal” foundation for nationalism (Billig 1995).

Domain of Public Sphere: In the public realm, objects cease to be silent, mundane entities and instead become the focus of attention (McDonnell 2023:209). In such moments, they function as metonymies for abstract ideas, rendering otherwise invisible concepts visible and vivid (Alexander 2004; Reed 2006:150–155). I argue that in this domain, the cultural understandings cultivated in everyday life are transformed into explicit icons of the “nation.”

Case, Method, and Materials

This study focuses on the role of objects in the historical construction of nationalism, i.e., the decomposition of previous cultural systems and the emergence of nationalism. The historical transformation from imperial China to the modern nation-state provides an illuminating case.

First, imperial China possessed a worldview fundamentally different from nationalism. In simple terms, this worldview can be summarized as Sinocentrism—an *illusio* ideology that imagined China as the center of a hierarchical world order (Zhao 2015). In the 19th and 20th centuries, under the challenge of colonial powers, such ideologies collapsed, giving way to nationalism (Zhao 2004). Thus, the historical development of nationalism can be traced by examining the transition from Sinocentrism to modern nationalist ideology.

Moreover, in this transformation, commodities played a crucial role. A key foundation of Sinocentrism was the imperial state’s capacity to regulate transnational commercial activity (Kang 2012). Beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, however, the colonial state challenged existing power by forcibly opening trade ports and exporting goods to China. These interventions profoundly transformed everyday life and eventually spurred the “national products movement” (Robinson and Gallagher 1953; Gallagher and Robinson 2017; Dikötter 2007; Gerth 2003). Thus, the Chinese case can also help demonstrate the crucial role of material objects in the construction of nationalism.

To concretize the discussion, I choose to focus on a specific category of commodities: writing instruments. Traditionally, East Asian intellectuals used the writing brush as their primary writing instrument. The writing brush is characterized by a soft tip made of animal hair, which requires specialized techniques to control. By the late eighteenth century, however, pencils, fountain pens, slate pencils, chalk, and other writing tools—referred to by Chinese intellectuals as “foreign pens”—began to enter the Chinese market. Characterized by their hard tips, these “foreign pens” facilitated changes in writing habits, particularly in the grip and technique of writing, in contrast to the soft-tip brush. This transformation of writing instruments closely paralleled the political transition from empire to nation-state.

As mentioned above, this study adopts the “social life of things” approach. “Cultural biography” of writing instruments (Kopytoff 1986). I will separately describe the social life of different types of writing instruments in the domain of market, the domain of everyday use, and the domain of public sphere. I retrieved primary materials from digital archival databases. Newspapers and journals were primarily accessed through the National Newspaper Index Database, the China Historical Literature Database: Modern Newspaper Archive, the *Shun Pao* Database, and the *Eastern Miscellany* Database. Books from the Republican period were mainly drawn from the Hanwen Republican Book Collection and the Late Qing and Republican Period Literature Platform. I used keywords such as “writing brush,” “pencil,” “fountain pen,” “foreign pen,” and “stationery” to search these sources. In addition, I consulted commercial records preserved in the Shanghai Municipal Archives and the Beijing Municipal Archives, and I examined the Maritime Customs Reports to gather information on international commerce.

Findings

Domain of Market: In the mid-19th century, foreign pens penetrated the Chinese market, further integrating Chinese stationary business to the world market. Although this process originated in colonial expansion aimed at dominating the Chinese market, it unintentionally enabled Chinese economic actors to exploit the new market for pencils and fountain pens—by selling “foreign pens” and cooperating with foreign companies to establish domestic pencil and fountain pen factories. Meanwhile, writing brush businesses are also reconstructed. In this economic transformation, workers and businessmen were drawn to coastal treaty ports to access both the national and international markets. In short, these commercial transformations 1) increase economic actors’ dependence on the world market, thereby undermining the relative self-sufficiency of the Chinese market—the material foundation of sinocentrism and 2) cause changes in distributive capacity: introducing “foreign writing instruments” while keeping writing brushes available.

Domain of Everyday Use: During the imperial era, writing brush was a symbol of the universal superiority of Chinese culture. The use of the writing brush was stabilized by social institutions. For Chinese intellectuals, proficiency with the brush and immersion in calligraphic culture represented the definitive path to cultural refinement. Educational transformations disrupted the traditional system, creating opportunities for pedagogical change. Western writing

instruments were introduced in this context: first, in elementary instruction, particularly courses teaching Chinese characters—though the brush remained essential for advanced calligraphy due to its 'softness'; second, in new subjects such as science and foreign languages, where foreign writing instruments were widely adopted. As a result, the use of 'foreign pens' became routinized. The material distinction between brushes and pencils materialized the division between calligraphy and everyday writing, between artistry and utility. Thus, foreign pens challenged the assumed universality of traditional writing culture, making it no longer unquestioned, yet still recognized for its value.

Domain of Public Sphere: As economic merchants were drawn into the world market, they not only gained new economic opportunities but also faced increased competition. To maximize profits, they needed to enhance their competitiveness. In this context, nationalist discourse became a useful cultural tool. Economic interests incentivized them to participate in public debates and generate nationalist rhetoric to protect their commercial interests. Since writing instruments were everyday objects, campaigns advocating the boycott of “foreign pens” and the promotion of domestic products aimed to mobilize a broad range of ordinary consumers.

The routinization of foreign writing instruments provided opportunities for two different groups to invoke nationalist discourse. On the one hand, pencil and fountain pen entrepreneurs emphasized the convenience of “foreign pens” and legitimized their production. This corresponds to nationalist discourse that framed national interests through survival in a hostile global environment and justified the imperative of modernization. From this perspective, the adoption of convenient “foreign pens” was justified. On the other hand, writing brush merchants depicted themselves as defenders against foreign influence, calling for the protection of traditional writing tools. This aligns with a branch of nationalist discourse that emphasizes the distinctiveness of “national culture”.

Discussions

This study highlights that material objects not only can be enlisted by nationalism, but also actively engage in its construction. As previous scholarship shows, economic factors often drive nationalist processes—through the imperatives of industrialization, the consolidation of the nation-state system, or competition with foreign firms in the domestic market (Gellner 1983; Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Goswami 2004). This study further illustrates how economic transformation can align with nationalism not primarily through ideological means, but through the dynamics of materiality.

In non-Western colonial contexts, this alignment often exhibits a dual nature. Chatterjee (1993) shows that Indian nationalists distinguished a material domain governed by Western standards of civilization from a spiritual domain intended to preserve native culture. Similarly, Chinese nationalism during the colonial era reflects a comparable tension: when transnational commodities challenged the taken-for-grantedness of “tradition,” traditional practices could no longer be upheld as universal, yet certain cultural value was still recognized. Unlike Chatterjee, who focuses more on political thoughts, this study demonstrates that such duality is also mediated and sustained by concrete objects.

This research also contributes to transcending the nation-state-centered paradigm (Robinson 1998; Wimmer and Schiller 2002). On the one hand, it identifies how transnational commodities can provoke nationalist sentiment, showing that nationalism itself can be partly understood as a product of transnational processes. On the other hand, by focusing on China, the study necessarily engages with the transformation from a premodern empire to a modern nation-state. In this context, the imperial framework provides a stable point of reference for understanding the emergence of nationalist structures (Wimmer and Min 2006; Kumar 2010).

Finally, this research examines the material foundations of culture. Rather than treating materiality as “abstract” economic interest, it considers the movement and circulation of tangible objects. Objects do not “determine” culture, but “condition” cultural practices. For example, the availability of foreign writing instruments does not automatically shape writing culture; only through practical incorporation can these objects participate in meaning-making. In this process, distributional availability serves as a central medium linking economic change with cultural transformation, offering a foundation for future studies to systematize the relationship between materiality and culture beyond simple economic determinism.

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