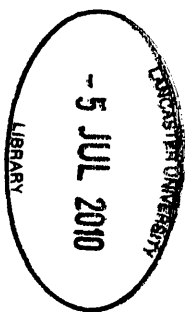*Exploring and Conceptualising the Interrelationships between*

Self and Possessions through

Hong Kong Chinese Consumers' Narratives

Phoebe Wong MA, MSc

Thesis submitted to Lancaster University

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

(PhD)

February 2010

ProQuest Number: 11003467

ProQuest 11003467

DECLARATION

This thesis is the author's own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

To Markus and Hanna

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Exploring and Conceptualising the Interrelationships between

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Abstract

Drawing on literature from the social and cultural psychology of the self and consumer research about possessions and the extended self, this study investigates and conceptualises each informant's pattern of self-configuration in terms of the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self, and examines each informant's self-possession boundary via their stories about important possessions.

Using a method of narrative inquiry, 20 Hong Kong Chinese informants were interviewed. The interviews generated 115 stories about their important possessions and these were used to explore how informants revealed their sense of self and how they constructed the meanings of possessions and the self-possession boundary. Analysis was undertaken in two stages and structured around firstly within-case analysis and secondly cross-case analysis.

Based on the empirical findings, five patterns of self-configuration, revolving around the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self, emerged. They are: the complete relational self-configuration, the relationally-led self-configuration, the personal-relational equilibrium, the personally-led self-configuration and the personal-relational-collective self-configuration. The empirical findings show that Hong Kong Chinese informants tend to focus more on the relational dimension of the self (e.g. interpersonal relationships with others)

while they place less emphasis on the personal (e.g. personal achievement) and collective (e.g. in-group membership) dimensions of the self in their stories about important possessions. Thus, an extended framework of the continuum of self-configurations is developed and proposed which goes beyond the empirical findings providing a foundation for additional research in the future.

In addition, the empirical findings showed that a broader interpretation of the self-possession boundary was found in Chinese consumers' stories about their important possessions. The self-possession boundary is defined as the delineation of the relationship between an individual's sense of self and possessions (i.e. the possessions are "MINE"). Most of the informants' possession stories in this study are in line with the western-based definition of self-possession boundary. However, some of the informants' possession stories did not fit neatly into any western-based description (e.g. informants considered gifts that they had *given* to close others as still remaining as part of their own important possessions). This is what is identified and termed as informants' *"extended possessions"* within the self-possession boundary. I extended the concept of possessions and the extended self and built a modified framework as one of my theoretical contributions in order to explain the wider concept of the self-possession boundary that captures the concept of *extended possessions* within the self-possession boundary in this study.

Chapter 1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the background of this study i.e. the existing terrain of the self-concept and possessions across the disciplines of cultural psychology, social psychology and consumer research (section 1.1.) and outlines the research goal and research questions (section 1.2). The structure of the thesis, chapter by chapter, is presented at the end of this chapter (section 1.3).

1.1 The Existing Terrain of the Concept of Self and Possessions

1.1.1 Possessions:

Possessions and the extended self (1988: 188) have received extensive attention in consumer research. Belk (1984) has suggested that there are different cultural interpretations of the concepts of self and possessions. There is growing interest for consumer researchers in exploring the concept of self and possessions outside the Western contexts. For example, Mehta and Belk (1991) studied possessions, identity and transition in Indian families; Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) conducted a cross-cultural inquiry between American families and Nigerian families; and Eckhardt and Houston (2001) studied the nature of possessions in China. Researchers who seek additional insights into possessions and the self have suggested that using different empirical contexts will potentially enhance our understanding of the relationship between possessions and the self (Bih 1992, Piron 2006). This study examines the interrelationships between the self and possessions among Hong Kong Chinese consumers. Informants reveal their sense of self and meanings of their possessions through their storytelling about their important possessions.

1.1.2 Self:

This study examines the areas of the self and possessions by drawing on the disciplines of cultural psychology, social psychology and consumer research. Firstly from cultural psychology, Markus and Kitayama (1991) proposed independent and interdependent self-construals or individual and collective selves (Triandis 1989) to explain people's construction of the self. People with an independent self-construal tend to focus on their autonomy, differentiation from others and inner attributes, whereas people with an interdependent self-construal seem to focus on harmony, connectedness and togetherness in terms of their relationships with significant others or groups. In addition, recent research has proposed that people can hold onto both these different self-construals at the same time (Singelis 1994, Kashima et al. 1995, Brewer and Roccas 2001, Sedikides and Brewer 2001).

Secondly from social psychology, Brewer and Gardner (1996) developed Markus and Kitayama's concept of self-construals further by suggesting a trichotomization of the self, i.e. the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self. The personal dimension of the self focuses on individualistic characteristics, traits, personal development and achievement. The relational self is defined by the interpersonal dyadic relationship between an individual and significant others via bonds of attachment (e.g. relationships of husband-wife, parent-child, siblings, friends, romantic partners, teacher-student, etc) (Aron et al. 1991, Markus and Kitayama 1991, Sedikides and Brewer 2001, Brewer and Chen 2007). In contrast to the relational dimension of the self, the collective dimension of the self refers to an individual's depersonalized relationships with others who share membership in different groups (e.g. religious groups, political groups, ethnic groups, etc).

However, studies of the self-concept traditionally focus on "individuated conceptualization of the self... focus on internal structure and differentiation of the self-concept rather than

connections to the external world" (Brewer 1991: 475); for example, self-schema, self-monitoring and self-regulatory goal. In the light of the interrelationships between "the individuated conceptualization of the self" and consumer behaviour, some consumer researchers, tended to focus on such areas as studying self-regulatory goals and persuasion (Aaker and Lee 2001), shopping experiences (Babin and Attaway 1995) and consumer decision-making (Dewitte et al. 2009), self-monitoring and the meaning of brands (Auty and Elliott 2001), and self-schema and consumer behaviour (Wheeler et al. 2005). These studies focus on the psychological perspective of the self and neglect the construction of the self from the social perspective (Brewer 1991). However, the self is not constructed in a vacuum. In contrast, the self is defined through different social contexts and interactions with other people, groups or societies (Brewer and Yuki 2007).

In addition, consumer researchers have become increasingly interested in examining the interrelationships between self-construals (Markus and Kitayama 1991) and consumer behaviour. Although consumer researchers have acknowledged that both independent and interdependent self-construals coexist in every individual (Aaker and Lee 2001, Aaker and Schmitt 2001, Escalas and Bettman 2005, Ng and Houston 2006, Jain et al. 2007), they have tended to only focus on examining one of the self-construals at a time in their quantitative studies and have neglected the potential coexistence and interrelationship between the independent and interdependent self-construals in consumer research. As Higgins and May (2001) note, "Although most theories of the self allow for the possibility that all three types of self-representation exist within the same person, the questions of how they coexist remains" (p. 48). So far, no studies have explored how consumers construct and reveal the concept of self in the light of the trichotomization of the self and how different configurations of these three dimensions (i.e. the personal, relational and collective dimensions) of the self coexist within individual consumers in relation to possessions. This study addresses this gap using an

East Asian context to investigate and conceptualise the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self as revealed via Hong Kong Chinese consumers' stories about their important possessions.

1.2 Overview: Hong Kong Chinese Society

Hong Kong was a colony of the United Kingdom for more than 100 years and was handed over to China in 1997. With its colonial history, Hong Kong is one of the most modern of cities in China with a distinctive Western and Chinese heterogeneous cultural system (Bond 1986). According to Mathews's study (1997: 9), "Hongkongese" as a cultural identity combines with "Chineseness plus Westerness" and can be viewed in three groups. The first group of people regarded themselves as "Chineseness plus affluence/ cosmopolitanism/ capitalism". Due to the colonial history, the Hong Kong government advocates open-market economy with a free trading port and low taxation in order to attract foreign companies to set up business in Hong Kong. This advantage has turned Hong Kong, a fishing village a hundred years ago, into one of the world's leading international financial centres. The second group of people considered themselves as "Chineseness plus English/ colonial education". Under the British rules, Hong Kong was introduced to the British education system and English became one of the official languages in Hong Kong. Bilingualism is one of the characteristics of Hong Kong Chinese identity. The third group of people viewed themselves as "Chineseness plus democracy/ human rights/ the rule of law". During the colonial period, the British government introduced limited democracy and set up a legislative council in Hong Kong. This has a profound impact on political system in Hong Kong. Although Hong Kong is part of China, Hong Kong still retains considerable autonomy, called "one country, two systems".

About 98% of 6.9 million people in Hong Kong are ethnic Chinese. With all the influences from the West, researchers have tried to investigate whether the ethnicity of Hong Kong people is Chinese or a mixture of Chinese and Western. On one hand, Trafimow et al. (1997)

argued that Hong Kong people are westernized due to the influences of British education and political system. On the other hand, Gardner et al (1999) and Kemmelmeier and Cheng (2004) regarded Hong Kong people first and foremost Chinese. It is believed that "Hong Kong Chinese are bicultural even though a larger proportion of daily context may be shaped by Chinese culture... most individuals transition in and out of different cultural contexts (e.g., home vs. university), requiring full cultural competency in both (Chineseness and Westerness)" (Kemmelmeier and Cheng 2004: 708).

While Hong Kong Chinese are influenced by Western education and political systems, Confucianism is still an important foundation and guide for their social behaviour (Bond 1986). The fundamental Confucian assumption in social behaviour is that "man exists in relationship to others... which see man as a relational being, socially situated and defined within an interactive context" (Bond and Hwang 1986: 215). In Confucianism, each relationship is defined and constructed in a hierarchical pattern (e.g. father-son and superior-inferior) and each party in a relationship carries certain responsibilities, roles and duties. Primarily, the internal characteristics of Hong Kong people are quite different from the West. People in Hong Kong tend to emphasize fitting-in and togetherness with others who comprise in-groups in their self-definition in order to maintain harmony in social contexts. In contrast, people in the West seem to focus on internal attributes (e.g. belief and values) and promote uniqueness, autonomy and differentiation from others in their self-definition (See Chapter 2 for further discussion) (Markus and Kitayama 1991, Kim 1994). Responding to calls for seeking additional insights into possessions and the self from different empirical context (Mehta and Belk 1991, Eckhardt and Houston 2001, Piron 2006), Hong Kong can thus be used as a non-Western context in this study to advance our understanding of the interrelationships between possessions and the self.

1.3 Research Goal and Questions

The goal of this thesis is therefore to examine the interrelationships between informants' sense of the self and possessions; to investigate the interpretation of the meanings of possessions; and to conceptualise informants' configurations of the self in terms of the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self through their possession stories in the context of Hong Kong Chinese society. This thesis seeks to address the following questions:

(1) What are the personal and sociocultural influences on informants' life worlds that affect the construction of their narratives about important possessions?

(2) How do informants reveal their sense of self in terms of the personal, relational and/ or collective dimensions of the self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) in relation to their stories about important possessions?

(3) How do informants interpret their meanings of possessions?

(4) What constitutes the self-possession boundary in a non-Western context?

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters. The structure is as follows:

Chapter 2 offers a review of the literature on the self and possessions from the disciplines of cultural psychology, social psychology and consumer research followed by a presentation of the research objectives of the study.

Chapter 3 outlines my research philosophy, methodology and the methods I used in this study drawing on Crotty's framework scaffolding approach, which forms the basis of a research framework centering around the issues of ontology and epistemology (i.e. social constructionism), theoretical perspective (i.e. interpretivism), methodology (i.e. narrative inquiry) and methods.

Chapter 4 presents my analysis of a selection of ten of the twenty informants' (five females and five males) idiosyncratic stories about their important possessions (The other ten informants' narratives are presented in Appendix II). In each informant's story, I first present his/ her background and life history followed by the analysis of his/ her stories about important possessions reflecting the personal, relational or collective dimensions of the self.

Chapter 5 discusses the possession themes that emerged from these twenty informants' stories. Eleven themes are presented and discussed in this chapter. In addition, the interpretation of the self-possession boundary and the patterns of possession acquisition (i.e. self-gifts, gift-receipts, gift-giving and other objects) will be discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 6 explains how I developed and built my theoretical framework based on my empirical findings in order to address the research gap that I had identified, i.e. how the trichotomization of the self (i.e. the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self) coexists within individuals (Higgins and May 2001). My theoretical framework extends

Brewer and Gardner's theory of the trichotomization of the self. In addition, I will highlight some additional phenomena related to the self, possessions and consumption that emerged from the empirical findings of these Hong Kong Chinese informants.

Chapter 7 is the conclusion to this thesis. This chapter begins by summarizing the contents of my thesis. Then I will highlight the major contributions of this thesis at the academic level. Finally, I will discuss the marketing implications, the limitations of this thesis and directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Overview of the literature review

The aim of this chapter is to review the literature on self and possessions. This chapter will offer an overview of the research context for the study; highlight a number of gaps in the current literature and present research objectives that are derived from the literature at the end of the chapter.

2.2 Introduction

Understanding the interrelationships between the self and possessions is one of the key concerns of consumer research (Belk 1988, Kleine et al., 1995, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, Schultz et al., 1989, Price et al. 2000). This study attempts to investigate how Chinese consumers reveal their selves through storytelling about their important possessions, and examines the interrelationships between the self and possessions under the social and cultural influences in Hong Kong Chinese society.

This chapter aims to highlight a number of key research gaps in the literature surrounding possessions and the self, and suggests that the following areas could receive additional in-depth attention.

(1) How individual consumers reveal their sense of the self in relation to significant others and in-groups, (i.e. the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self) (Brewer and Gardner 1996) is underexplored,

(2) How these three dimensions of the self coexist within an individual consumer remains largely unexplored (Higgins and May 2001)

(3) How consumers construct meanings of possessions in a non-Western context requires more exploration (Belk 1984, Bih 1992, Piron 2006).

The main focus of this study will be an attempt to investigate, firstly, how Hong Kong

Chinese informants reveal dimensions of the self and secondly, explore how informants from

a non-Western context interpret the meaning of possessions. In order to establish the context

of this study, this chapter is organised into two parts: self and possessions (see Figure 2.1).

Self	**Possessions**
Self-concept paradigms (Section 2.2) Self from the cultural perspectives (Section 2.4) Self from the social perspectives (Section 2.5) The self in Hong Kong Chinese Society (Section 2.6)	Functions of possessions (Section 2.7.1) Meanings of possessions (Section 2.7.2) Studies in possessions in East Asia (Section 2.7.3 & 2.7.4) Gift-receipts and self-gifts as parts of individuals' possessions (Section 2.7.5)

Figure 2.1 Organisation of the Literature Review

In order to establish the background and to explain the importance of self-concept in this

study, the first part of the review looks at the self-concept paradigms (Section 2.3) that are

related to this study, and the self from the cultural (Section 2.4) and social (Section 2.5)

perspectives that the study draws on, before reviewing the self in Hong Kong Chinese society

(Section 2.6).

As culture plays a significant role in shaping individuals' self-construal, I examine culture

and self in the light of individualism and collectivism (Section 2.4.1 the cultural level), and

independent and interdependent self-construals (Section 2.4.2 the individual psychological

level). Markus and Kitayama (1991) proposed that people from different cultural

backgrounds tend to place different emphases in their self-construals: the independent and

interdependent self-construals. Next, I will examine the coexistence of the independent and

interdependent self-construals (Section 2.4.2.1) as this is one of the important concepts in this

study. Recent research suggests that these two self-construals can coexist within an individual and are activated depending on the situational context and time (Singelis 1994, Kashima et al. 1995). Finally, I will review studies about these two self-construals in relation to consumer research (Section 2.4.2.2) in order to identify the gap and show that the coexistence of the independent and interdependent self-construals in consumer research is underexplored.

After looking at the self from the cultural perspective, I will move on to review the self from the social psychological perspective (Section 2.5) thus I identify how this section links with my study. In particular, I will discuss how Brewer and Gardner (1996) developed Markus and Kitayama's (1991) concept of self-construal further by dividing interdependent self-construal into relational (e.g. significant others) and collective (e.g. in-group) dimensions of the self. Brewer and Gardner (1996) suggested that the self can be viewed in the light of the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self.

In order to explain the advantage of collecting stories about informants' important possessions in this study, the second part of this chapter reviews literature on possessions (Section 2.7) in relation to consumer research. I will first examine possessions in relation to the development of the self in terms of the self-developmental process (Section 2.7.1.1) and the temporal orientation of possessions (Section 2.7.1.2) in order to explain the importance of self and possessions in this study. Then I will review the literature on the meanings of possessions in the light of public and private meanings (Section 2.7.2.1), and instrumental and symbolic meanings (Section 2.7.2.2). Next, I will highlight studies about possessions in East Asia (Section 2.7.3), showing that little empirical research on possessions has been done in the eastern context. In addition, consumption and possessions in Hong Kong will be discussed in Section 2.7.4 in order to establish the background of the study. Finally I will examine gift-receipts and self-gifts in Section 2.7.5, as studies of gifts are relevant to this

study. Different types of gifts (the interpersonal gifts and self-gifts) will be discussed in this section. Gift-giving in the Chinese context (Section 2.7.5.1) will be discussed at the end of this section.

I will conclude this chapter by summarizing the foundations for this study based on the literature review undertaken in this chapter. The research objectives derived from the literature review will be presented at the end of this chapter in Section 2.8.

2.3 Self-concept Paradigms

This study draws on the two main areas of literature firstly of the self and secondly of possessions. The starting point drawing on Reed (2002) is to identify the self-concept paradigm used for this study. As Reed (2002) argued

> *"Accordingly, any paradigm that conceptualizes the self-concept must begin by defining it, because the working definition of the self-concept impacts the dimensionality of the construct. A paradigm's self-concept definition also specifies the nature of a potential theory that will operate within that paradigm..." (Reed 2002: 236).*

As shown in Figure 2.2, the self in this study draws on the conceptualization and arguments from two areas discussed by Reed (2002). Firstly, the paradigm of "the self as an object of introspection" (Reed 2002: 238) is based on James's self-concept of "I" as a knower and "Me" as a known object. The "Me" as a known object is related to the area of possessions and the self (the material self), as Belk (1988) noted "possessions and the extended self" (p.139). Secondly, the paradigm of "the self, social relationships and social identity" conceptualizes the definition of self in relation to others and groups.

The self as an object of introspection

The self, social relationship and social identity
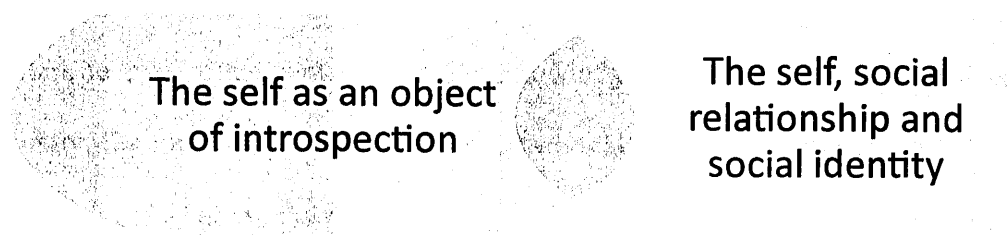
Figure 2.2: Self-Paradigmatic Approach in This Study (Adapted from Reed 2002)

According to Reed (2002), the first paradigm "the self as an object of introspection" suggests that one's inner thoughts about the self are projected through constellations of products or possessions. However, Brewer (1991), and Brewer and Gardner (1996) argued that an individual's self is not defined in isolation. In contrast, an individual's definition of self is closely linked to his or her relationships with others and what others think of that individual on the lines of what Cooley (1902) suggested as the "looking glass self". The paradigm of "the self, social relationships and social identity" captures the essence of this interrelationship between the self and others. It is important to note that these two paradigmatic approaches do not contradict each other. On the contrary, they complement each other. Synthesizing these two paradigmatic approaches to the self offers a viable and sustainable theoretical basis for this study because it investigates Chinese consumers' configurations of the self (i.e. the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self) through their storytelling about their important possessions. This section will draw together a series of arguments from the literature of the self in order to establish the foundations for this study.

The paradigm of "the self as an object of introspection" is largely drawn from James's concept of the self. The self is the concept of who I am, i.e. "the perception of oneself" (Sirgy

1982: 288). Rosenberg (1979: 7) suggests that self-concept is "the totality of individual's thought and feelings having reference to himself as an object". Self-concept can be viewed in terms of content and structure (Campbell et al. 1996, Stets and Burke 2004). The content refers to two components, firstly the knowledge and secondly the evaluative components. Firstly, the knowledge components (e.g. who/ what am I?) includes one's beliefs, attributes and values, whereas the second evaluative component is related to how one views oneself (e.g. how do I feel about myself?) as an attitude object (i.e. self-beliefs and self-esteem). The structure of the self-concept is about the organisation of these two components.

Belk's (1988) most frequently cited article "Possessions and the Extended Self" offers an explanation of the intertwined relationships between the self and possessions. The notion of the extended self was derived from James' notion of the me-self. James (James 1981) introduced numerous self-related concepts including the duality of the self, i.e. the I-self (the self as knower) and the me-self (the self as known). The "*I*" is the subjective knower and involves what individuals think about themselves in the process of forming a concept of self (James 1981). This process happens most of the time in the present time. In contrast, the "*Me*" is a known object of an individual's perception and thought. To establish the distinction of "*I*" and "*Me*", McAdams (1996) argues,

"The "I" as a process and the "Me" as a product. The "I" is really more like a verb; it might be called "selfing" or "I-ing", the fundamental process of making a self out of experience. To self (a verb) is to apprehend one's actions, thoughts, feelings, and so on as "mine"... The "Me" is the primary product of the selfing process... as an evolving collection of self-attributions that result from the selfing process" (p. 302).

In discussing the me-self, James used the term "the empirical self" to indicate how people think about themselves.

"I feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as I feel and act about ourselves. Our fame, our children, the work of our hands, may be as dear to us as our bodies are, and arouse the same feelings and the same acts of reprisal if attacked" (James 1890: 291).

Figure 2.3 summarizes James's the I-self and the me-self. James suggested three different but interrelated subcategories of the me-self: the material self that is related to things where we have a sense of ownership of (e.g. our bodies, family and possessions); the social self that refers to our relationships with others; and the spiritual self that is linked to our subjective feelings (Wozniak 1999).
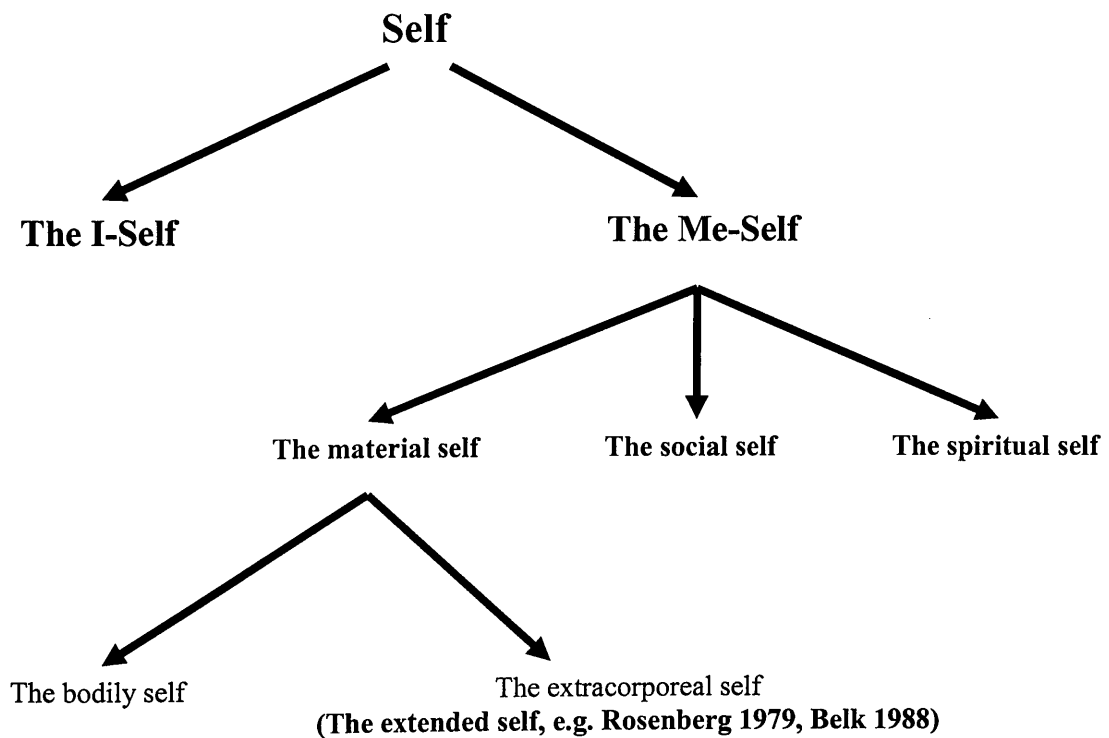
Figure 2.3: The Structure of the Self (Adapted from James 1890 and Rosenberg 1979)

The concept of the extended self is derived from James's "material self". "The material self refers to tangible objects, people or places that carry the designation my or mine." (Brown 1998: 21). This material self can be further divided into two subcategories: the bodily self and the extracorporeal (beyond the body) self. Rosenberg (1979) used a term "the extended self" to refer to the extracorporeal (beyond the body) self. The bodily aspect of the material self is related to a person's arms, legs (my body), or organs that s/he can clearly claim as hers or his. However, people's sense of self can be extended (beyond the body) to include possessions (my car), other people (my children), pets (my cat), abstract ideas (my suggestion), places (my hometown), productions (my painting), objects within a person's reach (a chair in a room) or distant physical environment (the moon) (Belk 1988, Brown 1998, Prelinger 1959, McClelland 1951). These things psychologically contribute part of who I am. Belk (1988) concluded "I may summarize the major categories of extended self as body, internal processes, ideas and experiences, and those persons, places and things to which one feels attached" (p. 141). In other words, the extended self and possessions are closely connected.

This study examines Chinese consumers' selves in the light of the meanings of possessions (the paradigm of "the self as an object of introspection" (Reeds 2002) but also attempts to seek understanding of how these consumers reveal their selves through their possession stories in relation to significant others and in-groups (the paradigm of "the self, social relationships and social identity" (Reeds 2002) thereby linking the material and social selves as identified by James (1981). As Reed (2002) argued, "the consumer is thought to often rely on the social meanings inherent in products as a guide to the performance of social roles" (p. 246). Issues of the self and social identity will be discussed in Section 2.4.

2.3.1 The Interrelationship between Self and Identity

Researchers seem to use the terms self and identity interchangeably (Belk 1988, Ahuvia 2005). However, it is important to differentiate the concepts of the self and identity for this study. Self can be defined by different dimensions (Brewer and Gardner 1996, Schubert and Otten 2002) and is formed from different identities (e.g. a mother, a wife, a friend or a colleague) depending on various situational contexts. These identities operate under the concept of the self. In addition, different identities can be activated simultaneously (e.g. identities of a mother, a daughter-in-law and a wife can all be activated at the same time in the context of Christmas dinner for instance) (Stets and Burke 2004, Worchel and Coutant 2004).

According to Stone (1971), identity is not a substitute for the self. In fact, identity helps people further define who they are in different social contexts. Identity is "the organized set of characteristics an individual perceives as representing or defining the self in a given social situation" (Kaiser 1997: 186). In the following example (Figure 2.4), an individual consists of different dimensions of the self (e.g. the personal, relational and collective self) with various identities (e.g. a mother, a wife, a member of the church or a colleague at work) in different contexts. The individual may share some common self-descriptions (e.g. honesty and caring) across different contexts or provide a specific self-description for a particular context (e.g. being religious as a member of the church).

Self-concept

Selves:	**Personal**			**Social**	
Dimensions	**Personal**	**Relational**		**Collective**	
Contexts:	Alone	At home	At home	In church	At a Football match
Identities:	Oneself	A mother	A wife	A churchgoer	A fan
Self-descriptions:	Quiet Relaxed	Caring Hardworking	Caring Affectionate	Religious Serious	Fanatical Vigorous
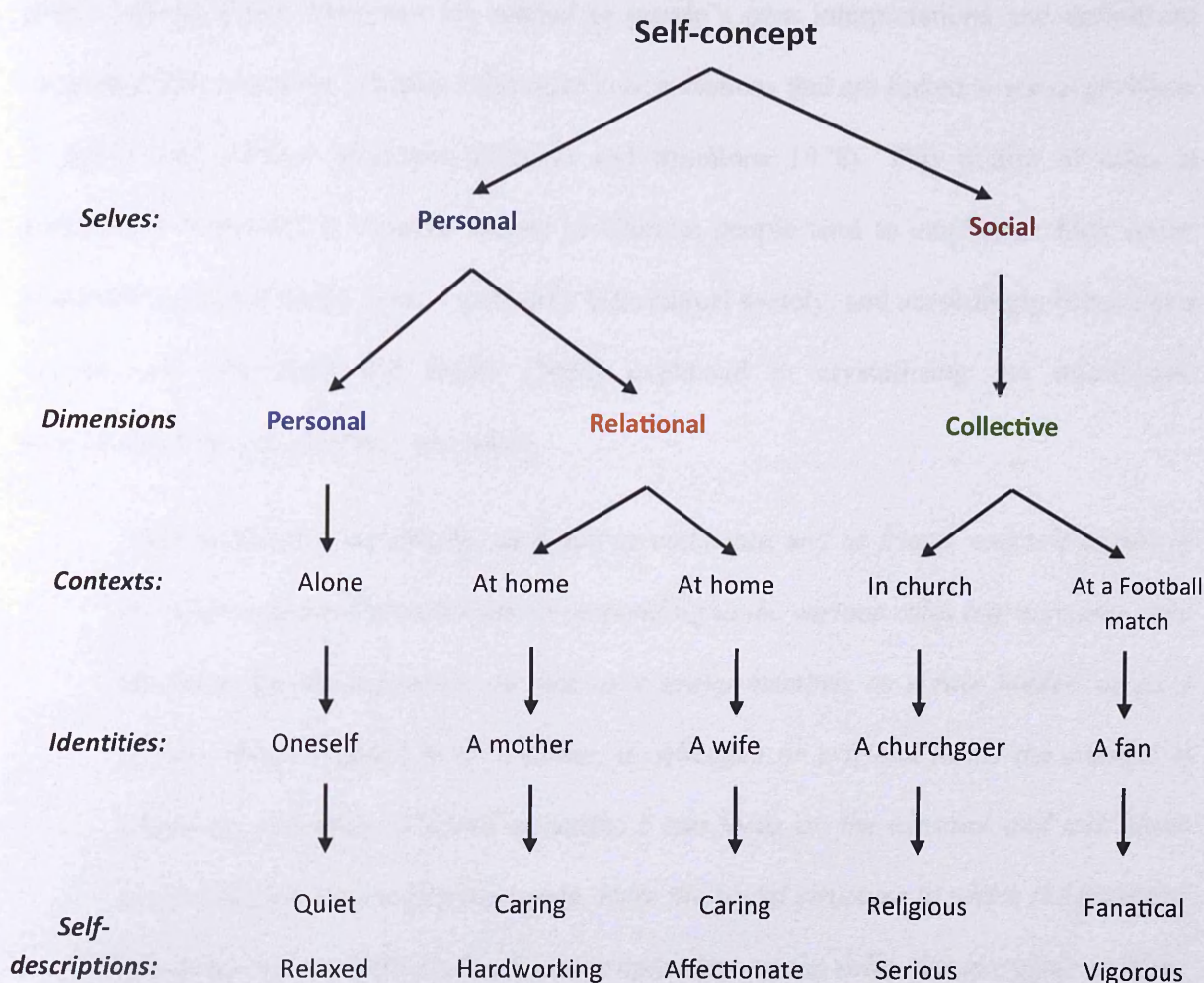
Figure 2.4: Hierarchical Knowledge Structures for Oneself
Adapted from Hogg and Abrams (1998: 54), Brewer and Gardner (1996: 84), Brown (1998: 21)

In line with Stets and Burke's (2004) argument, Kaiser (1997) has a detailed explanation of how the self, identity and role are interrelated to one another (see Figure 2.5). A person's self-concept consists of a subset of identities. The self is comprised of different identities (Rosenberg 1979, Laverie et al. 2002). People have different identities that are salient at different times depending on situational contexts. These identities may appear simultaneously (e.g. identities of mother and wife in the same setting – at home). Identities that are self-in-context contain a subset of roles. Roles hold certain positions in a social structure that direct

individuals' behaviour in a social setting (e.g. The President has certain roles and etiquette in public) (Rose 1962). Identities are related to people's own interpretations and definitions regarding their positions, whereas roles refer to expectations that are linked to social positions in social and cultural structures (McCall and Simmons 1978). This notion of roles is particularly important in Chinese society as Chinese people tend to emphasize their social positions, roles and duties in their culturally hierarchical society, and accordingly behave in a certain way. As Stets and Burke (2004) explained in crystallising the interrelated relationships of self, identities and roles:

> *"Self as father is an identity, as is self as colleague, self as friend, and self as any of the other myriad of possibilities corresponding to the various roles one may play. The identities are the meanings one has as a group member, as a role holder, or as a person. What it means to be a father, a colleague or a friend forms the content of identities....In terms of social structure, I can focus on the external and talk about actors taking a role or playing a role. Here the social structure in which the identities are embedded is relatively fixed, and people play out the roles that are given to them. Teachers do the things that teachers are supposed to do" (Stets and Burke 2004: 132).*
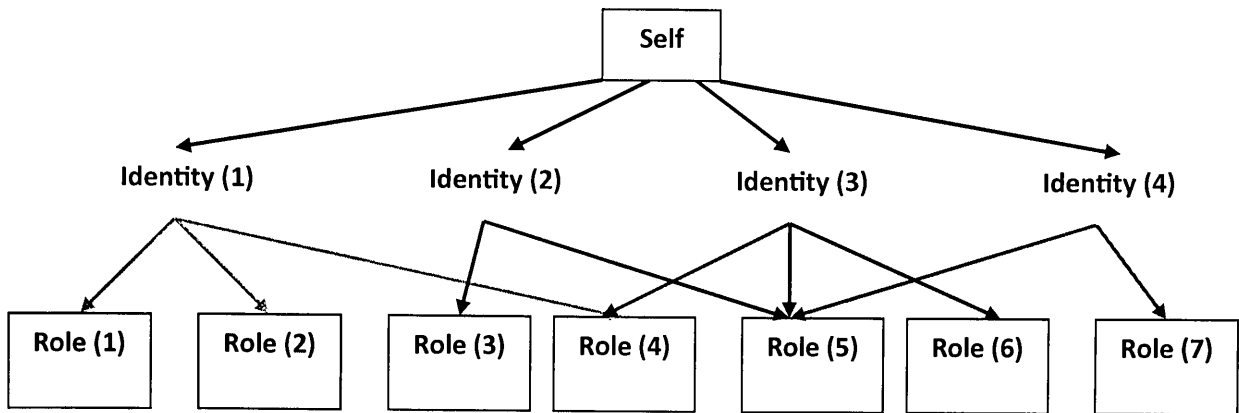
Self: The most abstract and inclusive concept; a global sense of who one is, composed of a subset of identities.

Identity: Self-in-context; constructed and negotiated through social processes (person interacting in context); composed of a subset of roles.

Role: Typified response to a typified expectation; most tangible of the three concepts – refers to performance or enactment (person acting, following a script that is prescribed); may or may not be included in an identity.

Figure 2.5: Schematic Illustration of Self, Identities and Roles - Source: Kaiser (1997: 193)

2.4 Culture and Self

Before discussing the cultural psychological perspective of the self (i.e. the independent and interdependent self-construals), I first look at culture as it plays a significant role in shaping individuals' behaviours, values, attitudes and provides an important context within which to understand the self, and also the meaning of possessions. As Kitayama and Cohen (2007) comment "culture cannot be understood without a deep understanding of the minds of people who make it up and, likewise, the mind cannot be understood without reference to the sociocultural environment to which it is adapted and attuned" (p. 2). Culture and self are closely intertwined with one another. People from different cultures place different emphasis on constructions of their self-construals (Markus and Kitayama 1991). "The self is a dynamic cultural creation; individuals' self views, emotions, and motivations take shape and form within a framework provided by cultural values, ideals, structures, and practices." (Cross and

Madson 1997: 6). In addition, Brewer and Chen (2007) provide a definition of culture that I have used for the purposes of this study.

"Broadly defined, culture is a system of shared meanings and understandings, together with a set of practices that enact and reinforce the shared worldviews. Culture provides group members with answers to fundamental questions, including questions of self and identity (Who am I or Who are I?), questions about how the physical and social world works and how things are interrelated (beliefs), and questions about how things should be and what is the right course of behaviour (values)" (p. 139)

Within cultural psychology, culture and self have been examined on the *cultural level* using attributes of individualism and collectivism, and on the *psychological level* using attributes of independent and interdependent self-construal (Markus and Kitayama 1991). The self-concept in my study is shaped by both the cultural and psychological influences. Therefore, I discuss these two levels and show how they relate to my study and the research gap I have identified.

2.4.1 Cultural Level: Individualism and Collectivism

On a cultural level, theorists such as Hofstede (1980), Hui (1988), Triandis (1989), Hui and Triandis (1986) have attempted to understand how culture and the self interact. They have proposed the individualism-collectivism dichotomy in order to explain how cultures operate in different societies. It should be noted that there are mixed opinions regarding Hofstede's approach, particularly the tendency of many studies to adopt this definition of individualism and collectivism largely unproblematically. Degabriele (2000) and McSweeney (2002) criticised the dichotomy of cultural categorization as too simplistic. Brewer and Yuki (2007)

also commented that "all societies must meet primary needs for both individual and social identity, and provide for an effective interface between individual self-interest and collective interests and welfare" (p. 308). However, researchers in marketing (e.g. Sondergaard (1994) and Nakata & Sivakumar (2001), despite these disputes, have tended to take it as a useful starting point to investigate the interrelationship between culture and the self in studies of culture and consumer behaviour.

Individualism emphasizes the uniqueness of a person and their separation from others and groups (Oyserman et al. (2002). They argued that a person who is from what is identified as an individualistic culture tends to be more independent, autonomous and goal-oriented. In contrast, collectivist societies are seen to encourage togetherness in groups which means that the emphasis on the "I" as a collective self rather than as an individualistic self. The importance is placed on connectedness, group dependency, duties and obligations (Triandis 1989). Within collectivist societies, there tend to be certain roles and duties in a hierarchy. Being in a group and following group norms takes a priority over personal preferences as Park (1998) noted "greater conformity is expected in collectivist oriented societies because collectivistic cultures stress that group welfare and goals have primacy over individual welfare and goals" (p. 579).

2.4.2 Psychological Level: Independent and Interdependent Self-Construals

The literature on the self (the independent and interdependent self-construals) from the cultural psychological perspective provides an important concept for this study because it helps to establish the foundation for the proposed research. The cultural context plays a critical role in shaping people's view of their sense of self. Recent cross-cultural research has suggested that the social dimensions of the self have a potentially significant influence on people's self-concept. Cultural psychologists Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggest that

people from different cultures place a different emphasis within their self-construals[1]. Markus and Kitayama (1991) proposed independent and interdependent self-construals or individual and collective selves (Triandis 1989) to explain people's construction of the self and argued that "an individual's identity is constructed from the wider cultural context within which the individual exists" (Lindridge et al. 2004: 215). Markus and Kitayama (1991) noted that a distinction can be made between the independent self, found mostly in individualistic Western cultural societies, and the interdependent self, found mostly in collectivistic cultural societies (e.g. China or Japan). Gardner et al. (1999) noted that "the ability to construe the self in an independent or interdependent fashion may be a human universal that may be shaped by cultural practices that encourage independence or interdependence to varying degrees (p. 325)."

Table 2.1 summarizes the characteristics of independent and interdependent self-construals. People with the independent self-construal focus on their unique traits, autonomy, differentiation from others and inner attributes, whereas people with the interdependent self-construal focus on harmony, connectedness and togetherness in terms of their interpersonal relationship with significant others who comprise their in-groups. Chinese consumers tend to place more emphasis on the interdependent view of the self that focuses on harmony, connectedness and togetherness in terms of their interpersonal relationship with significant others who comprise their in-groups (Markus and Kitayama 1991, Triandis 1989, Kim 1994). Chinese consumers appear to place their emphasis on the significant role of relationships in terms of belonging to and fitting in with family, with important reference groups and with society based on different social roles and duties in their approach to consumption (Yau 1988,

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[1] "Self-construal refers to how people perceive themselves to be linked (or not) with other people" (Zhang and Shrum 2099: 839).

Yang 1995). This is particularly important for this study as the social and cultural contexts influence people's construction of the self and how they make sense of their consumption experiences.

	Independent Self-construal (e.g. United States, Australia)	Interdependent Self-construal (e.g. China, Japan)
Definition	Separate from social context	Connected with social context
Structure	Bounded, unitary, stable	Flexible, variable
Important features	Internal, private (abilities, thoughts, feelings)	External, public (statuses, roles, relationships)
Tasks	Be unique Express self Realize internal attributes Promote own goals Be direct: "say what's on your mind"	Belong, fit-in Occupy one's proper place Engage in appropriate action Promote others' goals Be indirect: "read other's mind"

Table 2.1: Summary of Key Differences between an Independent and an Interdependent Construal of the Self (Source: Markus and Kitayama 1991: 230)

In terms of the structure of the interdependent self, the self is fluid, flexible, porous and variable depending on the social context as seen in the dash-lined circle of the self as shown

in Figure 2.6. As a result, Chinese consumers with an interdependent self-construal (the dashed-line circle) tend to include others or in-groups within their self and view these people or in-groups as part of their self.
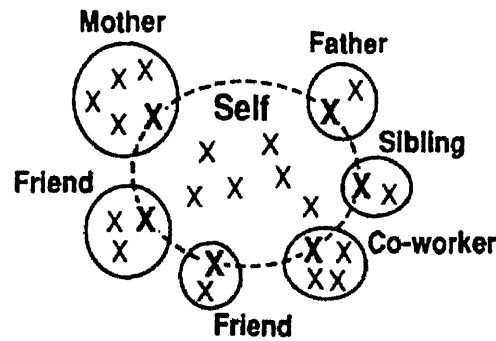
Figure 2.6: Conceptual Representation of the Interdependent View of Self (Source: Markus and Kitayama 1991: 226)

For these individuals, the self is defined by their social roles, duties and contexts. People with the interdependent self-construal seem to include significant others (e.g. father, teachers, friends) in their self-definitions and consider the relationships with them as part of their configuration of their own sense of self. "Indeed, one's thoughts, feelings, and wishes may be interpreted and understood in light of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of close others... The goals and needs of family and close others are often as important as one's own goals and needs." (Cross and Madson 1997: 7) The self in the interdependent self-construal (the dashed-line circle) expand and include others and views others as part of one's self. (Further discussion will be in the section of "Self in Hong Kong Chinese Society" (Section 2.7).

2.4.2.1 Coexistence of Independent and Interdependent Self-construals

Within cultural psychology, recent research has suggested that people can hold both independent and interdependent self-construals (Singelis 1994, Kashima et al. 1995, Brewer and Roccas 2001, Brewer and Chen 2007, Sedikides and Brewer 2001). Brewer and Gardner (1996: 83) argued "... these different self-construals may also *coexist* within the same individual, available to be activated at different times or in different contexts" (Emphasis added). In other words, both self-construals could potentially coexist within every individual. As Brewer and Chen (2007) noted,

> *"Within any culture, individuals can place some importance on individual uniqueness, interpersonal relationships and group memberships, believe in the efficacy of both independent and interdependent problem solving, and place value on the interest of self, specific others and groups as a whole." (p. 141)*

Brewer and Chen's (2007) explanation goes some way towards potentially providing a more nuanced reading of the self compared with the application of Hofstede's individualist and collectivist distinction by earlier researchers in marketing. Although both independent and interdependent self-construals can coexist, different societies and cultures emphasize and cultivate a particular self-construal often making this contextualized self-construal more accessible (i.e. chronic accessibility) than others (Escalas 2004, Singelis and Brown 1995). "This particular view of the self becomes chronically more accessible at the individual level." (Aaker and Lee 2001: 35) The locus and content of these self-construals are "clearly culturally defined and regulated" (Brewer and Yuki 2007: 307). People are influenced by different cultural emphases such as beliefs (e.g. Buddhism versus Christianity) and philosophies (Confucianism versus Liberalism) (Aaker and Schmitt 2001). For example, American culture encourages differentiation and uniqueness whereas Chinese culture fosters

connectedness, togetherness and assimilation among others. In addition, each individual within a society or culture places different degrees of emphasis on his or her self-construal and therefore activates different self-construals depending on their circumstances (Lee et al. 2000).

The meaning of context includes the situational, temporal and external circumstances that render a particular self-construal salient to an individual at a specific time. As Abrams and Hogg (2004) commented, "the different cultures also provide a basis for different self-construals, which in turn are associated with different cognitive, emotional and motivational features" (p. 151). Assuming that both self-construals can coexist in an individual, and can be activated depending on different social contexts, one self-construal might become more prominent in a specific context when the other self-construal is less important. For example, when individuals focus on how they might achieve their goals in a project, the individual aspect of self (the independent self-construal) becomes more prominent compared with the interdependent self-construal in that particular context. This is particularly important for this study as consumers narrate their important possessions that are linked to different times (e.g. past, present or future), situations and/ or in different contexts and thereby reveal different views of the self.

To summarize this section, the assumption is that self-construals can coexist within an individual with chronic and temporary accessibility[2]. It is particularly important for this study as I investigate how consumers from a non-western context can potentially reveal their sense of self through their storytelling about their important possessions.

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[2] The chronic accessibility of self-concept is considered to be relatively stable due to social and cultural influences, whereas the temporary accessibility of the self-concept refers to the changes in the self in responding to different contexts.

2.4.2.2 Self-construals in Consumer Research

Consumer research has examined the interrelationships between the independent and interdependent self and consumer behaviour. In particular, researchers have compared how people with different self-construals change the emphasis in their consumer behaviours. For instance, studies of self-construals in two groups of people from different cultural ethnic backgrounds have been conducted in terms of product evaluation (Aaker and Lee 2001, Aaker and Maheswaran 1997); consumption symbols as self-expression (Aaker and Schmitt 2001); brand meanings (Escalas and Bettman 2003, Escalas and Bettman 2005, Ng and Houston 2006, Swaminathan et al. 2007), impulsive consumption (Zhang and Shrum 2009) and object categorization (Jain et al. 2007). The findings of these studies show how self-construals appeared at different times and/or in different contexts between two different groups using various manipulations (e.g. priming) in these quantitative studies. Appendix I summarizes these studies of self-construals and consumer behaviour in greater details.

In addition, Joy and her colleagues (Joy 2001, Joy et al. 2006) studied gift-giving in Hong Kong and Eckhardt and Houston (2001) investigated the meanings of possessions in China using the interdependent self-construal as a collectivist cultural backdrop for their studies. Researchers in these studies suggested that people with different cultural and societal backgrounds tend to place different emphases within their self-construals. These studies provide a significant foundation for this study because I seek to investigate how Chinese informants reveal their sense of self through their possession stories and how their social and cultural backgrounds influence the way they make sense of the self.

Although consumer researchers have acknowledged that both independent and interdependent self-construals coexist in every individual (Aaker and Lee 2001, Aaker and Schmitt 2001, Escalas and Bettman 2005, Ng and Houston 2006, Jain et al. 2007), they only

examined one specific self-construal at a time in their quantitative studies rather than the potential coexistence and interrelationship between the independent and interdependent self-construals. For example, Ng and Houston (2006) used a self-view priming manipulation to tease out one of the self-construals in order to examine interrelationships between that particular self-construal and brand attitudes in a group of students from different cultural backgrounds. Until now, studies of the coexistence of independent and interdependent self-construals among consumers have attracted little research attention.

In other words, researchers have potentially neglected one of the most important areas that might provide valuable insights into how the self-concept operates, i.e. how these self-construals can potentially coexist within an individual in relation to consumer behaviour. This study addresses this gap by investigating how Hong Kong Chinese informants construct their sense of self and how different dimensions of the self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) coexist within an individual.

2.5 Self-concept from the Social Psychological Perspective

Having examined the self from the cultural psychological perspective, I now move to the social psychological perspective in this section as it is one of the key concepts in this study. Within social psychology, different theorists tend to create or use different terms that often address similar ideas as Banister (2001) commented "ambiguity still exists... much of the confusion would seem to stem from theorists using different terms to address what are seemingly similar, or could be perceived as complementary, concepts of the self" (p. 30). As discussed above in section 2.4.2, cultural psychologists view the self in the light of the independent and interdependent self-construals. Social psychologists also adopt similar classifications of the self that address comparable ideas. From the social psychological perspective, the self can be viewed in terms of two areas, i.e. personal identity and social identity (Tajfel 1978, Hogg and Abrams 1998).

Personal identity is defined by the unique personal constellation of traits, beliefs and attributes or interpersonal relationships (Hogg and Abrams 1998). In contrast, social identity is the collective sense of the self that implies "a shift towards the perception of self as an interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away from the perception of self as a unique person" (Turner et al. 1987: 50). In other words, social identity involves different social units, roles or contexts that "... depersonalize the self-concept, where I becomes we" (Brewer 1991: 476) compared with personal identity. The concept of social identity that is derived from social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) has had a significant impact on the development of the self in social psychology. The concept of social identity is further refined and developed in social categorization theory (Turner et al. 1987). These two fundamental theories (i.e. social identity and social categorization) have both had an important influence on Brewer and Gardner's development of the trichotomization of the self

(1996) (the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self) which is one of the key ideas pursued in this study.

As a result, the sequence of the discussion of the self from the social psychological perspective in this section will be as follows: I will first discuss social identity theory (SIT) and then social categorization theory (SCT) (section 2.5.1). This then leads into a discussion of Brewer and Gardner's trichotomization of the self (section 2.5.2).

2.5.1 Social Identity Theory and Social Categorization Theory

Tajfel and Turner (1979) developed social identity theory (SIT) in order to understand social identity and in-group identification. They suggested that people are motivated to be biased towards their in-group. According to Tajel (1981), social identity is viewed as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 255). In other words, social identity theory posits that group memberships are incorporated into an individual's self, influencing their motivation, attitudes and behaviours (Tropp and Wright 2001). Social identity theory also suggests that through a process of assimilation, people in an in-group perceive more similarity in terms of attribute, attitudes and behaviour with other in-group members compared with people from an out-group. This notion is similar to Markus and Kitayama's (1991) interdependent self, i.e. that people include others from an in-group in their self-definition.

Extending the notion of social identity theory, Turner et al. (1987) conjectured that social identities imply a depersonalized representation of the self. This is the key concept of social categorization theory as "the basic process underlying group phenomena, social stereotyping, group cohesiveness, ethnocentrism, co-operation and altruism, emotional contagion and

empathy, collective action, shared norms and social influence" (Turner et al. 1987: 50). When a collective social identity is salient, individuals shift their representation from "I" to "We" and behave as group members. This transformation implies that individuals with the salient collective self view themselves "as embodiments of a common shared social category" (Brewer and Chen 2007: 135). To summarize, Brewer and Yuki (2007) commented "social identity theory in conjunction with social categorization theory provides a single comprehensive theory of group behaviour and the cognitive processes that underlie a range of intergroup and group phenomena" (p. 309). This is particularly important for the present study that investigates how Chinese consumers reveal their sense of self in relation to significant others and in-groups. In addition, Brewer and Gardner's (1996) trichotomization of the self (the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self) is developed from social identity theory and social categorization theory and is another key underpinning assumption of this study.

2.5.2 Brewer and Gardner's Trichotomization of the Self

Taking theories from Tajfel and Turner (1979) and Turner et al. (1987) into account, Brewer and Gardner (1996) developed Markus and Kitayama's (1991) notion of self-construals further by proposing a trichotomization of the self: the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self. Brewer and Gardner (1996) suggested that these dimensions of the self coexist within every individual. In particular, this trichotomization of the self addresses an important theoretical distinction between the dimensions of the relational self (e.g. significant others) and the collective self (e.g. in-group memberships).

As Figure 2.7 illustrates, the independent construal of the self is related to the personal dimension of self (e.g. autonomy or differentiation from others) while the interdependent construal of the self is related firstly to the relational self (e.g. significant others) and

secondly to the collective self (e.g. in-groups). In other words, "the self-concept not only can be studied at the individual level, but also at the interpersonal and group level" (Higgins and May 2001: 48)

Cultural Psychology

Markus & Kitayama (1991)

Social Psychology

Brewer & Gardner (1996)

The **independent** self ⟶ The **personal** dimension self

The **interdependent** self

The **relational** dimension self

The **collective** dimension self
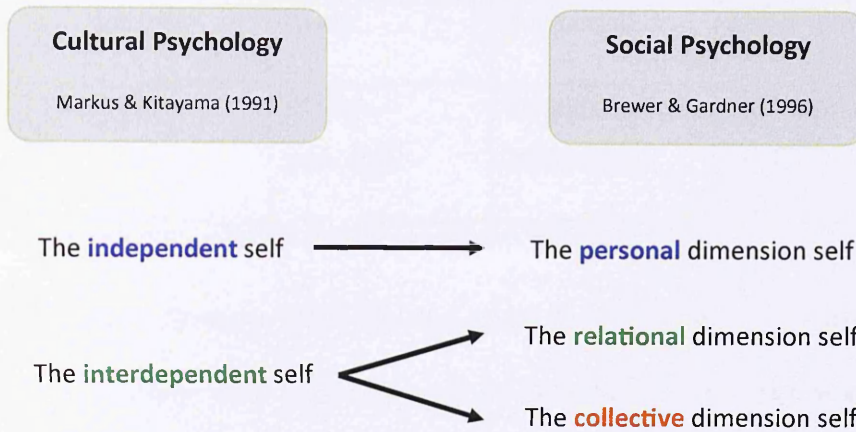
Figure 2.7: Selves in Cultural Psychology & Social Psychology

Table 2.2 presents the differences between the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self in terms of self-evaluation, frame of reference and basic social motivation. The dimension of the personal self is related to the unique attributes of a person (e.g. physical characteristics, traits and ability) and "is derived from self-evaluation of personal traits and characteristics based on interpersonal comparisons to relevant others" (Brewer and Gardner 1996: 85). This dimension of the personal self focuses on individualistic characteristics, traits, values, beliefs, personal development, and achievements.

Level of analysis	Self-concept	Basis of self-evaluation	Frame of reference	Basic social motivation
Individual	Personal	Traits	Interpersonal comparison	Self-interest
Interpersonal	Relational	Roles	Reflection	Other's benefit
Group	Collective	Group prototype	Intergroup comparison	Collective Welfare

Table 2.2: Levels of Representation of the Self (Brewer and Gardner 1996: 84)

In addition, Brewer and Gardner (1996) divided social identities into the relational self and the collective self. Firstly, the relational self is defined by the interpersonal dyadic relationship between an individual and significant others (e.g. relationships of husband-wife, parent-child, siblings, friends, romantic partners, teacher-student, etc) (Aron, Aron, Tudor & Nelson 1991, Markus and Kitayama 1991, Sedikides and Brewer 2001). These interpersonal identities also "include identities derived from membership in small, face-to-face groups that are essentially networks of such dyadic relationships" (Brewer and Gardner 1996: 83). The relational self is linked to interpersonal dyadic relationship between an individual and his/ her significant others with bonds of attachment (Brewer and Chen 2007). The self-evaluation of the relational self is based on role behaviour. The process of self-evaluation is called reflection "in the sense that the self is derived from the responses and satisfaction of the other person in the relationship" (Brewer and Gardner 1996:85).

Secondly, in contrast to the relational self, the collective dimension of the self refers to an individual's depersonalized relationships with others who share membership in groups (e.g. religious groups, social groups, ethnic groups, etc). As Sedikides and Brewer (2001) commented "The collective self is based on impersonal bonds to others derived from common (and oftentimes symbolic) identification with a group. These bonds do not require

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close personal relationships among group members." (p.1) Brewer and Chen (2007) also commented that "collective identities do not require interpersonal knowledge or interaction but rely on shared symbols and cognitive representations of the group as a unit independent of personal relationships within the group" (p. 137). The collective self represents the concept of social identity as suggested in social identity theory and social categorization theory (Hogg & Abrams 1988; Turner et al. 1987). Table 2.3 demonstrates these three dimensions of the self in relation to self-evaluation with examples.

Dimension of Self	Description	Example	Basis of Self Evaluation
Personal	Perceived physical characteristics, traits and abilities	I am blonde; I am shy,	Personal achievements; Correspondence between present self-views and various hypothetical self-views (e.g. the ideal self, undesired self or ought self).
Relational	Other people with whom I have direct, personal contact.	I am Sheri's husband.	Pride in the accomplishments of particular others with whom they are joined.
Collective	Social categories to which I belong	I am Irish. I belong to an elite club.	Ethnic pride; pride in the various groups of which I are members.

Table 2.3: Dimensions of the Self with examples (Source: Brown 1998: 39)

Studies of the self-concept traditionally focus on "individuated conceptualization of the self" (Brewer 1991: 475) in terms of how they view their selves on the individualized personal dimension; for example, self-schema, self-monitoring and self-regulatory goals. Brewer (1991) argued that,

"Social identities are self-definitions that are more inclusive than the individuated self-concept of most American psychology. Most of social psychology theories of the self fail to take into account the significance of social identification in the definition of self... for the most part, our theories focus on internal structure and differentiation of the self-concept rather than connections to the external world" (p. 475).

In the light of the interrelationships between "the individuated conceptualization of the self" and consumer behaviour, some consumer researchers, for example, focus on studying self-regulatory goals and persuasion (Aaker & Lee 2001), shopping experiences (Babin & Darden 1995) and consumer decision-making (Dewitter et al. 2009), self-monitoring and the meaning of brands (Auty & Elliot 1998), and self-schema and consumer behaviour (Wheeler et al. 2009). These studies focus on the psychological perspective of the self and neglect the construction of the self from the social perspective (Brewer 1991). The self is not constructed in vacuum. In contrast, the self is defined through different social contexts and interactions with other people, groups or societies (Brewer and Yuki 2007). Little empirical research has been conducted in the area of the coexistence of the self in relation to the personal, relational (e.g. significant others) and the collective (e.g. groups) dimensions of the self in consumer research. This study addresses this gap by exploring how Chinese consumers reveal their sense of self in relation to Brewer and Gardner's (1996) trichotomization of the self (i.e. the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self).

To summarize, this section discussed the self from the social psychological perspective. In reviewing this part of the literature, it became apparent that studies of the self-concept have been focused on the individuated conceptualization of the self and that research was lacking on the significance of the interrelationship of the interpersonal, relational and group collective dimensions. In addition, how these different dimensions of the self coexist within individual consumers largely remains unanswered.

Higgins and May (2001) noted, "Although most theories of the self allow for the possibility that all three types of self-representation exist within the same person, the questions of how they coexist remains" (p. 48). So far, no studies have explored how consumers construct and reveal their sense of self using the trichotomization of the self; and how different configurations capture the ways in which these three dimensions of the self might coexist in different ways.

2.6 Self in Hong Kong Chinese Society

Having discussed the self from the cultural psychological and social psychological view points, I will now describe Chinese culture, the backdrop for this study; and also deal with the interrelationship between Chinese culture and the Chinese concept of the self. In particular, I will discuss the Confucian five cardinal hierarchies, filial piety and the concept of "great self" (da wo) (Bedford and Hwang 2003) that influence the construction of their sense of the self by Chinese individuals. This study will attempt to understand how Chinese consumers construct their sense of the self through storytelling about possessions.

Chinese values and cultural influences, i.e. Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, play important roles in shaping people's selves (Aaker and Schmitt 2001) and in gift-giving behaviour (Joy 2001), even in a westernised city like Hong Kong. Rather than the Judeo-

Christian western perspective of the equality of mankind, Chinese people use Confucianism's five cardinal hierarchies to see people's lives as an inheritance from their parents (Bedford and Hwang 2003). The Confucian rules are drawn from the "five cardinal hierarchies": father-son, husband-wife, elder-young, emperor-subject, and friend-friend (Yau 1988, Su et al. 1999). Chinese social behaviour and self-construals are largely influenced by Confucianism. Bond and Hwang (1986) summarised the fundamental aspects of Confucianism in constructing a Chinese social psychology as follows:

"(a) man exists through, and is defined by, his relationships to others; (b) these relationships are structured hierarchically; (c) social order is ensured through each party's honouring the requirements in the role relationships" (p. 216)

There is a certain authority and respect present at each level or in each relationship, i.e. the fathers and elders have authority over their sons; and the younger members, in their turn, respect and, to a certain extent, show obedience to and fear of the authority figures. As Bond and Hwang (1986) noted, "In each case, the senior member was accorded a wide range of prerogatives and authority with respect to the junior" (p. 215). Each person has his or her own role to perform, as well as a set of obligations to fulfil according to his or her position (e.g. a father/mother, son/daughter, a brother/sister, a husband/wife) in this Confucian hierarchy. Lindridge and Wang (2008) note that "these behaviours can then be identified with Confucian's communal identity, which emphasizes interdependence and in-group relationships" (p. 498).

The Confucian hierarchical system also emphasizes filial piety, the core idea of Confucian ethics.

"Our body, with hair and skin, is derived from our parents. One should not hurt one's own body in any situation. This is the starting point of filial piety" (Hsiao Ching 2005: 16).

"Father and son are one body; husband and wife, brothers are all one body." (cf. Hwang 1999: 169)

Filial piety entails "… not only obedience to them, but caring for and supporting them in old age…" (Morris 1994:115). For example, some people in Hong Kong exercise the notion of filial piety in their daily lives, e.g. by giving a portion of their salaries to their parents each month as a sign of supporting them and thanking them for raising them, paying for their holiday trips; or frequently taking them out for meals (Yau et al. 1999). Joy (2001) commented "because filial piety is enshrined in family relationships, children are forever indebted to their parents who gave them the ultimate gift – the gift of life" (Joy 2001).

In line with Markus and Kitayama (1991), Bedford and Hwang (2003) discussed the impact of Chinese culture on the self – the concept of "great self" (da wo) and suggested that the boundaries of the Chinese self are flexible enough to include significant others that comprise in-groups in the self. Chinese people tend to emphasize their connectedness and togetherness with significant others or in-groups. This argument is in line with Markus and Kitayama's (1991) notion of interdependent self-construal that people with the interdependent self-construal tend to incorporate significant others or in-groups into their concept of self. As Morris (1994) noted,

"The self was thus constructed within a collectivity of kinship networks and strongly bolstered by such cultural ideas as loyalty, filial piety and consideration for others.

This provided a degree of security for the individual, but it also downplayed individual autonomy" (p. 115)

This distinction between the Western view of the self (the independent self-construal) and the Chinese view of the self (the interdependent self-construal) serves as a starting point to investigate how the Chinese consumers in this study construct and reveal their sense of the self through their storytelling about their possessions.

Having discussed the self from the perspectives of both cultural psychology (section 2.4) and social psychology (section 2.5), I now move on to possessions and related areas (self-gifts and gift-receipts) (section 2.7) in the fourth part of the literature review.

2.7 Possessions

Possessions are viewed as part of the extended self (Belk 1988) and are the artefacts of the self (Kleine et al. 1995). "Self-artefacts help narrate stories of the self and reflect self-developmental tasks similar to those underlying life narratives" (Kleine et al. 1995: 341). People reveal different senses of their selves by retelling the stories of their possessions as "a major contributor to and reflection of our identities" (Belk 1988: 139). In addition, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) argued that "to understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things. What things are cherished and why..." (p. 14).

People use possessions as symbols to form their identity, to connect with significant others, and to take part in a larger group in a society (Schultz et al. 1989, Grubb and Grathwohl 1967, Levy 1959). Belk (1988) argues that "we are what we have is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behaviour" (p. 139). Possessions are like people's testimonies that symbolize their histories and experiences. Through possessions, people are able to reveal, form and maintain different aspects of their sense of self (Gentry et al. 1995, Dittmar 1991, Solomon 1983). People regard "possessions as an integral part of the self" (Dittmar 1992: 43) and possessions symbolize their intangible memories, experiences and feelings of the past through tangible objects. Possessions help people retrieve their intangible assets and narrate their sense of self so that they find it easier to describe themselves, significant others and other reference groups through possessions (Belch and Landon 1977, Hamm and Cundiff 1969, Holman 1981, Holman 1983, Dittmar 1989). As Kleine et al. noted (1995) "Possessions help narrate the development of a person's life story" (p. 327).

Researchers studied people's possessions, things or objects that were "important" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, Dittmar 1994), "special" (Price et al. 2000, Myers, 1985, Richins 1994b, Bih 1992), "cherished" (Curasi et al. 1999), "favourite" (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988, Schultz et al., 1989, Piron 2006, Mehta and Belk 1991), and "treasured" (Kamptner 1995). Figure 2.8 represents possessions as symbols in relation to identity. Possessions are viewed as having cultural and symbolic meanings (McCracken 1986, Gentry et al. 1995) that individuals (self) and others communicate with one another in an interaction process (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967). In addition, possessions, as a means of communication that consist of social and cultural symbols, reveal and influence people's self-definitions (Solomon 1983). In other words, possessions help individuals in "acquiring and expressing identity" (Dittmar 1992: 4). Individuals construe and reflect on their sense of self to both themselves and others though their important or favourite things or possessions (Dittmar 1992). Through the symbolic meanings of objects, individuals express who they are to others. "Material goods can give people the means of creating valued experiences, enhancing interpersonal relationships, and maintaining identity and self-continuity" (Dittmar 2004: 208).
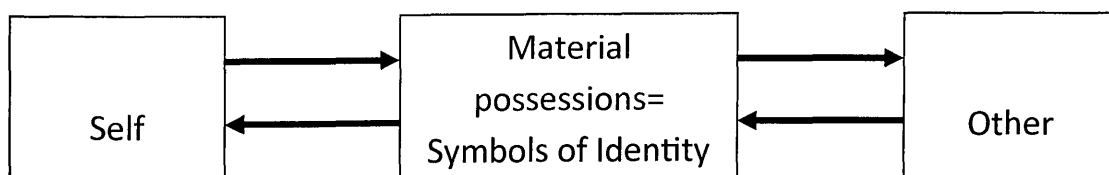
Figure 2.8: Material Possessions as Symbols to Identity (Source: Dittmar 1992: 11)

2.7.1 Self-developmental process and Self-continuity in Possession Attachment

This study seeks to examine how informants reflect on their sense of self in their stories about possessions. Possessions help consumers to construct and maintain their selves, reflecting on various stages of their lives and connecting to their self-developmental process and self-continuity. As Schultz et al. (1989) noted,

> *"Attachment is a multidimensional property of material object possession which represents the degree of linkage perceived by an individual and him or her self and particular object. This perceived linkage is reflected in the three orthogonal dimensions of individuation, integration and temporal orientation." (Schultz et al 1989, p. 360)*

Possession attachments consist of the relationship between an object and a person who possesses it, reflecting "the extent of me-ness associated with that possession" (Kleine et al. 1995, p. 327). The object becomes an important possession for the owner through interactions over time. In the process of interaction, the object is decommodified, singularised, personalized or even personified from being an ordinary common object to being an important object for the owner with additional symbolic and emotional meanings associated with it (Belk 1988, Schultz et al. 1989, Kleine and Baker 2004). The object has become a self-extension to the person and reflects the person's identity. Over time, the meanings of important possessions become idiosyncratic, singular and irreplaceable. These objects become unique items with different layers of meanings for the owner as they gradually take on "patina[3]" (McCracken 1990).

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[3] "Patina" consists of the physical and symbolic meanings. The physical meanings refer to "the small signs of age that accumulate on the surface of objects... As these objects are minutely dented, chipped, oxidized, and worn away, they begin to take on "patina" (McCracken 1990: 32).

In addition, people have different degrees of attachment to possessions, reflecting their relationships with their possessions. As Schultz et al. (1989) argue "the degree of attachment reflects in thoughts, feelings, and behaviours toward a particular object. Differences in these thoughts, feelings and behaviours should be evident between strong and weak attachments" (p. 360). Strong attachments tend to reflect a sense of extended self and more sentimental and emotional attributes. People who have strong attachments towards their objects tend to show some non-rational behaviour patterns, such as an unwillingness to sell, or to discard a possession when it has no further economic or functional value, feeling depressed when the object is lost and personifying the object (Belk 1991a). Weak attachments seem to be perceived more for the utilitarian attributes of the goods, and to be associated with unpleasant experiences or the negative self (Schultz et al. 1989). In order to establish the link between the self and possessions in this study, in this section, I will first discuss the self-developmental process in relation to possessions, followed by self-continuity in the light of the self, possessions and narratives that are the key areas of focus for this study.

2.7.1.1 Self-developmental Process

Several studies have explored the relationship between the self-developmental process and possessions (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, Schultz et al. 1989, Kleine et al. 1995). This study draws on the interrelationship of the self and possessions and explores how Chinese informants reveal their sense of the self (e.g. the autonomy/ differentiation of self and the affiliation/ integration of self) through their storytelling about possessions.

People use possessions to define, form and maintain their identities in the self-developmental process (Belk 1988, Schutlz et al. 1989). "Possessions are linked to the self, not because they fit a person's image, but because they enable self-cultivation" (Laverie et al. 2002). Through narrating stories about their possessions, some people focus more on their individuality in

terms of their achievements and independence, whereas others tend to place more emphasis on their connections with significant others in their relationships. In other words, possessions "reflect identity developmental progressions of people in two basic self-developmental tasks – the differentiation of self from others and the integration of self with others" (Schultz et al. 1989: 360). In addition, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) used the term "self-cultivation" to refer to the same idea of the self-developmental process suggested by Schutlz et al. (1989) and Kleine et al. (1995). Studies of possessions and the self have examined how people use possessions to reflect their selves and identities, and have suggested that possessions serve two self-development tasks, i.e. promoting one's uniqueness (autonomy) and emphasizing connections with others (affiliation) (Kleine et al. 1995).

Autonomy seeking is often associated with people who seek to establish autonomy from others and also to maintain a personal and unique identity. Possessions that involve autonomy seeking reflect people's desire to differentiate themselves from others and place greater emphasis on their individuality, achievements and uniqueness (Schutlz et al. 1989). A trophy that marks a person's success in a competition and an expensive car that signifies a person's social status are examples of autonomy seeking possessions. Affiliation seeking is related to the "*social* self" where people establish interpersonal connections with others and these possessions symbolize close relationships with significant others (Kleine et al. 1995).

Possessions often serve both autonomy and affiliation developmental tasks simultaneously in revealing the possessor's desire to be different and at the same time to be connected with others or with reference groups (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988, Richins 1994b, Tian et al. 2001). Taking an example of a leather briefcase from Richins (1994b), a person received a leather briefcase as a gift from his aunt to celebrate his graduation. This leather briefcase contains both aspects of autonomy (i.e. his achievement) and affiliation (i.e. his

connectedness with his aunt). In addition, this briefcase symbolizes his self-expression that differentiates him from others as Tian et al. (2001) suggested "individuals with a high consumer need for uniqueness would more often engage in the consumption of products for purposes of classification rather than experiences, integration or play" (p. 55).

2.7.1.2 Self-continuity: Self, Possessions and Narratives

This study explores how people construct their sense of the self through their narratives about their important possessions. It is important to delineate the intertwined relationships between the self, possessions and narratives. Possessions help people deal with changes or transitions in different life cycles and stages. As Schultz et al. 1989 noted "concrete objects help us make those transitions by permitting us to carry past selves into the present, to maintain present selves into transition into the future" (p. 360). Kleine and Kleine (2000) elaborated this point further,

> *"Not only do people use consumption for acquiring or maintaining an aspect of self-concept, they also use it to facilitate other kinds of identity change, namely, for temporarily or permanently laying aside an aspect of identity" (p 279).*

Possessions that carry the temporal orientation help people narrate the stability and development of changes in the self in their life stories (Kleine et al. 1995). Possessions are seen "as symbols of what we are, what we have been and what we are attempting to become" (Schultz et al. 1989, p. 359). The temporal features of possessions are consistent with narratives. In narratives, people retell and reorganise their past events and provide evaluations and add new meanings to them in the present time and sometimes predict possible futures. As Kleine et al. stated (1995: 327), "a special possession could facilitate self-continuity by

connecting a person with a desirable past self (e.g. memories), a present self (me now), or a future self (who I am becoming)".

Possessions are tangible objects that help people to store and retrieve a sense of past. When retrieving memories of possessions that remind people of their past selves, their minds travel back to those particular moments in terms of time, space and feelings in that situation (Belk 1991). For example, a photo taken by the beach reminds a person of the unforgettable childhood time with his/ her deceased parent. "It is this transcendence of the here and now that characterizes the sacred experience" (Belk et al. 1989: 30). It is the temporal and spatial dimensions of possessions that enable people to travel back to the past and to extend their selves. The main reasons that people have possessions that are important to them and help them retrieve their sense of the past is to provide them with a sense of security (Belk 1991a). Belk (1991a) and Rochberg-Halton (1986) emphasized the importance of the linkage of a sense of the past to help to create, form and maintain people's sense of identities in the present and future. It is important to note that this study will draw on the temporal characteristics of possessions and narratives in order to reveal informants' self-definitions through various events in their storytelling about their possessions, and thus providing rich and in-depth narratives.

> *"Without a demonstrable past, without the ability to remember where I have been, without some proof of our history, I don't know who I am and cannot forecast or plan where we're going" (Belk 1991b: 116).*

"Without remembrance, a life is subject to all the transient social fashions of the day, a leaf in the flux of a stream, incapable of calling anything truly its own, without its own conditioned history and grounds for self-control" (Rochberg-Halton 1986).

In addition, possessions are like testimonies or milestones that mark different life events and transitions in people's lives. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) pointed out that "an object that represents a past relationship does, in addition, have a present meaning and a projected future meaning as well" (p. 24). Possessions that people acquired in the past carry meanings in the present time and may anticipate meanings in the future (Kleine and Baker 2004). They mark people's growth and change in the transition of a life course.

As the self changes, the meanings of possessions change. People reconstruct and reinterpret meanings of past events through the tangible manifestations of possessions depending on their present conditions (Bih 1992). Although the historical fact of the events are unchanged, meanings of the self and evaluations could change as Ricoeur (1981) commented that narrating the meanings of possessions helps people to open up the possibility of interpreting past events. In addition, Kamptner (1989, 1991) argued that the self changes in congruence with changes in possession meanings in the life cycle. "The possessions symbolise their life experiences and relationships, thus the historical continuity of self" (Dittmar 2004, p. 208)

To sum up this section of possessions in relation to the self-developmental process and self-continuity, people tend to use possessions as an outlet to express their feelings, emotions and thoughts (Richins 1994b). Kleine and Baker (2004) suggested that possessions contain values of autobiography, story-telling, contemplation, action and self-boundary regulation so that people can achieve their self-developmental tasks (i.e. autonomy seeking and affiliation seeking) in their self-definitions (Table 2.4).

Values	Description
1) Autobiographical value	A person's self and identity are revealed in narrative autobiography, telling and retelling selected life events. Narrating a person's possession reflects autonomy and affiliation seeking.
2) Story-telling value	Possessions are tangible objects that mark the history of life events, help a person to travel back to the temporal and spatial past and make evaluations of a person's development.
3) Contemplation value **"Who am I"**	Contemplation value is related to use objects "for achievement of selfhood based on conscious reflections" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, p. 96).
4) Action value **"What I can do"**	Action value refers to objects that give a sense of ability and control (Furby 1991, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981)
5) Self-boundary regulation	Possessions signify "me-ness" (positive and desired self) and "not me-ness" (negative and undesired self) and extend the self-boundary (i.e. me-ness) in a temporal continuum either to the past or the future.

Table 2.4: Possession values in Self-Definitional Values (Source: Kleine and Baker 2004: 7)

2.7.2 Meanings of Possessions

People's sense of their selves and identities are strongly related to the meanings of their possessions (Dittmar 1989, Belk 1988). "People express their self-identities and interact with their environments through their mental and physical objects." (Prentice 1987: 993). This study draws on the investigation of the interrelationships between informants' self and the meanings of possessions in the East Asian context. Possessions contain cultural meanings that "contribute to the construction of the culturally constituted world precisely because they are a vital, tangible record of cultural meaning that is otherwise intangible" (McCracken 1986: 73). Meanings of possession can be viewed in two dimensions: public and private meanings (Solomon 1983, Richins 1994b) and instrumental and symbolic meanings (Prentice 1987, Dittmar 1992). In this section, I will first discuss the public and private meanings of possessions (Section 2.7.2.1). In addition, the instrumental and symbolic possession meanings will be introduced in the latter part of this section (section 2.7.2.2) as one of the key foundations for this study.

2.7.2.1 Public and Private Meanings

In the light of consumer studies about possessions, researchers tend to focus on the public and private meanings of possessions in relation to consumer behaviour (Wong and Ahuvia 1998, Richins 1994b, Richins 1994a, Chen 2009). Public meanings are defined and shared by members of a particular culture or society. They are not assigned by an individual. On the contrary, the collective meaning is shared by members of a society on a larger scale. Therefore, products and possessions serve as communication and socialization systems in self-presentation so that people can present their congruent identities through exchanging the public meanings of the products (Sirgy 1982). For example, consumers share a common

understanding about the public and social symbolic meanings of an expensive branded car that is linked to high social status (Richins 1994b).

In contrast to the public meanings of possessions, the private meanings refer to how a person can have his/ her subjective view of an object (Richins 1994b). The symbolic and emotional meanings of self-possession relationships are cultivated over time through repeated interactions. The additional idiosyncratic meanings are built on top of the functional and economical values of the possessions. These idiosyncratic meanings may not be "exchanged as economic commodities, the meanings that adhere in possessions are generally inalienable" (Belk 1987: 153).

Both public and private meanings are dynamic and change over time. The private meanings change based on the owner's life stage, experiences and preferences, whereas changes in public meanings reveal a transformation in popular perceptions of a product by members of a society or cultural group. Although the public and private meanings often share some similarity, they are different in nature. The private meanings of possessions involve the owner's personal feelings and idiosyncratic experiences with the product; whereas the public meanings of possessions are influenced by a group or a society. These groups play a significant role in ascribing a shared public meaning to a good and shaping the desire for these products among members in the society using mass media, such as advertising and television, in order to convey the shared public meanings (McCracken 1986, Richins 1994b).

Most of the consumer research in East Asia has been focused mainly on the public meaning of possessions (e.g. social appropriateness and conspicuous consumption (e.g. Wong and Ahuvia 1998, Lai and Zaichkowsky 1999, Chang 2004, Tse 1996, Yau et al. 1999). In this study, however, I explore not only the public meaning of possessions, but also the private

meanings of possessions that reveal aspects of informants' self and identity. I can potentially

then arrive at a better understanding of informants' selves because: "internal attributes

represent the hidden side of the coin and social demands represent the visible side" (Kim

1994: 38).

2.7.2.2 Instrumental and Symbolic Meanings of Possessions

From the social psychology perspective, researchers tend to discuss possession meanings in

terms of the instrumental purposes and symbolic expressions (Abelson and Prentice 1987,

Abelson 1986) of possessions. This study examines how informants reveal their sense of the

self by narrating their instrumental and/ or symbolic meanings of possessions. Prentice (1987)

also noted,

"Across cultures and societies, people treasure symbolic objects, such as religious

symbols and money, because these possessions provide a means to express valued

personal traits, particularly power and status. They value instrumental objects, such as

a spear or an automobile, because these possessions are tools that they can use to

affect and control the environment" (p. 993).

The instrumental aspects of possessions are related to actual use and the function of the

possessions that provide utilitarian benefits for the user, e.g. cars, tools, appliances, etc. The

instrumental function of possessions include enjoyment, freedom and activity that gives

people a sense of control over the environment (Kamptner 1991). In contrast, the symbolic

meanings of possessions are less utilitarian. They refer to memories about significant others,

cultural-religious related issues, personal history, self-expression and personal

accomplishments and are linked to two sub-dimensions, the self-expressive and categorical

dimensions (Dittmar 1992). The symbolic aspects of possessions express valued personal

traits and emphasize a person's identity in relation to his/ her sense of self, i.e. self-expressive (e.g. trophies) and significant others or groups, i.e. categorical (e.g. a school year book). As Dittmar (1989) noted "self-expressive functions concern individual's unique attitudes, goals and personal qualities. As categorical symbols, they can signify status and the broad social categories I belong to, but also smaller groups I identify with." (p. 167). Figure 2.9 summarizes the instrumental and symbolic meanings of possessions for self-definition.
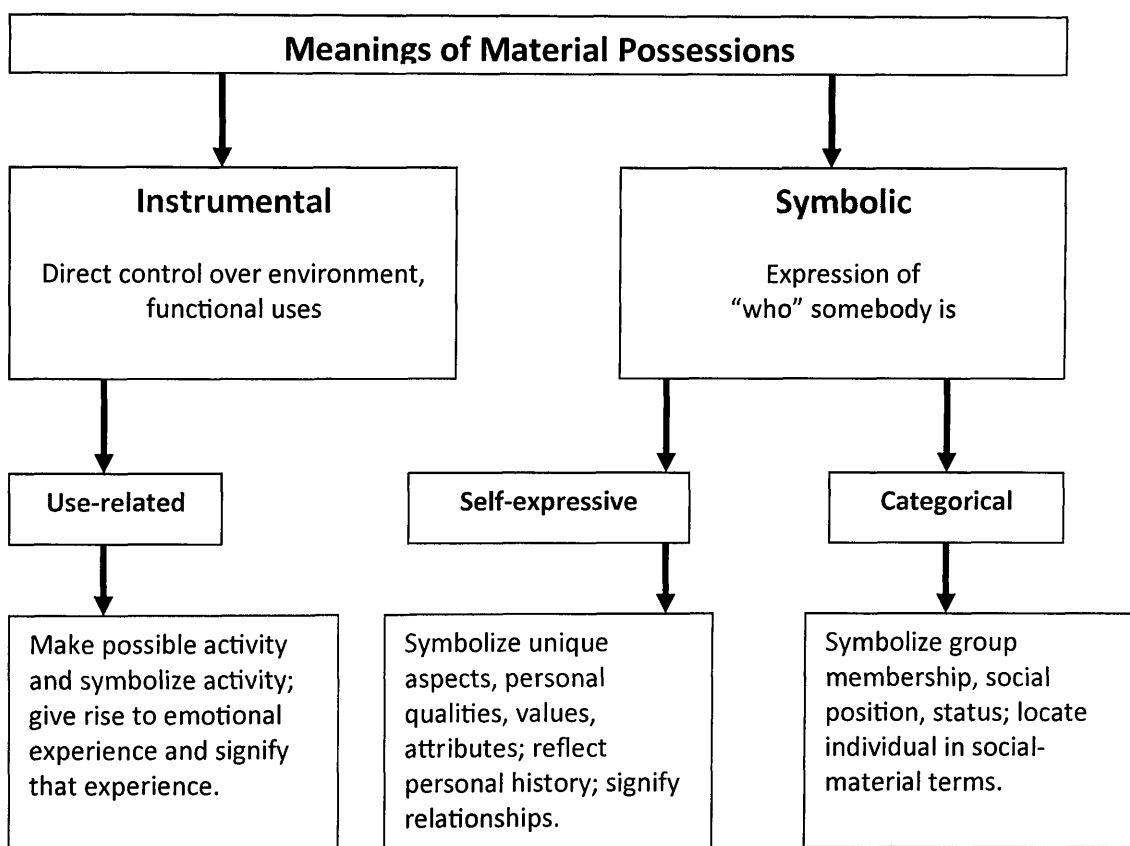
Figure 2.9: Meanings of Material Possessions for Identity (Source: Dittmar 1992: 89)

Literature on the symbolic and non-symbolic properties of possessions in marketing and consumer research is well established, for example, possessions and the extended self (Belk 1988), possession meanings in the US and Nigeria (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988), in China (Eckhardt and Houston 2001) and in the Indian community (Mehta and Belk 1991), as well as dispossessions in transition (Young 1991, Gentry et al. 1995) and disposition (Price et al. 2000). Consumers' possessions are viewed as an integral part of the self (Belk 1988) reflecting who they are through the instrumental and symbolic meanings of their possessions. The literature on symbolic & non-symbolic properties of possessions is relevant for this study as informants form, enhance, and reinforce their sense of self through their narratives about their important possessions.

Synthesizing Dittmar's (1989, 1991) classification of possession meanings, Richins (1994b) developed and refined the classification further by including additional categories according to the emergent themes from the data in her study in order to provide a comprehensive categorization. Table 2.5 summarizes Richins' classification of possession meanings.

Functions	Category	Descriptions
Instrumental	1) Utilitarian	a) Provides a necessity such as transport and food
		b) Enhances efficiency or effectiveness (e.g. computers)
		c) Valued for performance characteristics or functional attributes (e.g. an electric guitar)
		d) Provides freedom, independence (e.g. a car, a house)
	2) Enjoyment	a) Provides pleasure/ enjoyment. entertainment (e.g. a stereo)
		b) Provides relaxation, comfort, a retreat or escape (e.g. home)
		c) Provides companionship (e.g. a cat, a piano)
	3) Financial aspects	a) References to investment value or provides financial security (e.g. a house)
		b) References to cost or expense of the possession (e.g. a car, an expensive watch)
	4) Appearance-related	a) Enhances owner's appearance (e.g. jewellery)
		b) References to cost or expense of the possession (e.g. a Ferrari car)
Symbolic	5) Identity	a) Self-expression (e.g. clothing - individuality/ differentiation from others)
		b) Symbolizes creative expressions (e.g. painting tools - personal skills/ capabilities)
		c) Represents achievement (e.g. a trophy)
		d) Symbolizes personal histories (e.g. a stuffed toy - childhood)
	6) Interpersonal ties	a) Represents interpersonal ties
		(1) symbolic ties to others e.g. a wedding ring
		(2) Gifts (e.g. a tie)
		(3) Symbols of familial history (e.g. an heirloom)
		b) Facilitates creation or strengthening of interpersonal ties (e.g. swimming pool, home)
	7) Status	a) Represents social prestige value and social status (e.g. a reward)

Table 2.5: Richins' Classification of Meanings of Possessions (Adapted from: Richins 1994b)

2.7.3 Possession Studies in East Asia

Consumer research on possessions is prolific in the western literatures. However, there has been limited consumer research on possessions in the Asian literatures. Although Richins' (1994b) classification of possession meanings has been widely used in consumer research, Eckhardt and Houston (2001) argued that Richins' classification has its limitations in terms of explaining the findings from their research into the nature of possessions in China. Researchers seeking additional insights into possessions and the self have suggested that using different empirical contexts will potentially enhance our understanding of the relationship between possessions and the self (Bih 1992, Piron 2006). In this section, three studies (Ross 1991, Bih 1992 and Eckhardt and Houston 2001) on possessions in East Asian contexts will be highlighted in order to identify the research gap to establish that more exploration in relation to the self and possessions in a non-western contexts is needed (Belk 1984).

Ross (1991) studied the definition of possessions from a Tibetan Buddhist point of view and criticized the limitations of traditional western approach to psychology. He examined how Tibetan Buddhists viewed their selves and identities differently from the traditional Western approach. Tibetan Buddhists view possessions at two different levels, i.e. possessing (personal attachment) and possessiveness, and encourage people to have non-attachment possessions in order to be freed from self-indulgence. Ross (1991) further expanded the nature of possessions to "include non-material objects such as identity, personality, belief and ideologies." (p. 415).

Bih (1992) investigated how fourteen Chinese students from Taiwan, who pursued their studies in the United States, interpreted objects that they had brought with them in order to cope with the anticipated changes in their lives, and to help them adapt to a new and foreign

environment. The meanings of objects included values, achievement, memories, social exchange, experience and extension of self. During the transition, the Chinese students adopted different strategies in order to settle into their new environment, including maintaining existing objects, and putting less emphasis on existing objects while acquiring new objects. Some of the Chinese students mentioned desired objects (i.e. objects that they had not acquired and would like to have in the future) as their cherished objects. Bih (1992) concluded that the objects that Chinese students had are strongly linked to their family ties that are highly valued in Chinese culture.

Eckhardt and Houston (2001) used semi-structured group interviewing to conduct research into people's important possessions in Southern China. They explored how Chinese consumers ascribed meanings to possessions and concluded that Chinese have a broader sense of the nature of possessions, ranging from tangible possessions used mainly to maintain and enhance social ties, to intangible possessions (e.g. love of the family and friendship) to desired objects (e.g. objects they do not have at present but wish to have in the future). The findings about the intangible characteristics of possessions (e.g. youth, sense of humour, education and family love) are consistent with earlier findings (Ross 1991). In addition, Eckhardt and Houston's (2001) research supported Bih's (1992) findings where Chinese people mentioned desired objects, i.e. objects they do not have currently as among their cherished objects.

In terms of possessions and the extended self, Belk (1988) has suggested a western-based definition in terms of what we own is what we possess (e.g. my car, my house, my bank account, my painting). He summarised that "...the major categories of extended self as body, internal processes, ideas and experiences, and those persons, places and things to which one feels attached" (p. 141). Eckhardt and Houston's (2001) findings suggested that Chinese

people might have "a broader and more holistic idea of what possession is" (p. 256) and suggested that the definition of possession is quite different from that used in studies of western possessions (e.g. Richins 1994b). They argued that "people with individualistic self-construals and more categorical thought patterns typically do not think of owning something like the feelings they have for their parents [as their important possessions]" (p. 257). This serves as a starting point to explore informants' interpretation and meanings of possessions in this study.

2.7.4 Consumption and Possessions in Hong Kong

This study investigates the interrelationships between the self and possessions in Hong Kong Chinese society. This section provides a brief introduction to consumption and possessions in Hong Kong in order to help readers to get a better understanding of the context of the study. Mathews and Lui (2001) suggested some key characteristics of life in Hong Kong that influence Hong Kong Chinese consumption and possessions. Firstly, the change in the economic situation and living standards in Hong Kong since 1960s has played a significant role in Hong Kong Chinese consumers' consumption patterns. Hong Kong was a developing city in the past but has now transformed itself and is part of the international financial markets with high levels of purchasing power. Wong and Zaichkowsky (1999) commented that "the rapid economic growth in Asia has increased people's purchasing power and, thus, has opened the market for luxury brands" (p 310). As people's standard of living has improved, they have tended to use branded products to signify their improved social status and reflect their achievement to others (Dubois and Duquesne 1993). For example, Hong Kong has more Rolls Royces per capita than any other city in the world and has the world record for per capita consumption of cognac (Tse 1996). This symbolic consumption of luxury goods encodes success, prestige and social status for Hong Kong consumers. This also

becomes an inspiration and desire for other people, who strive to achieve the same status and prestige by acquiring the same luxury goods in order to keep up (Zheng 1992).

Secondly, money and wealth are emphasized in Hong Kong as Mathews and Lui (2001) noted "social class in Hong Kong has been based, quite nakedly on money; the richer you are, the higher class you are" (p. 8). This is due to "the South Asian consumer culture's focus on locating individuals vertically within the socioeconomic hierarchy. Because one's position in these societies is determined largely by economic advancement, displays of wealth become important social markers" (Wong and Ahuvia 1998: 431). Hong Kong Chinese consumers need to use money to measure their success and to mark their position in that hierarchy. They seem to have a strong desire to possess luxury brands and are keen on displaying their wealth in public (Tai and Tam 1996). As Zheng (1992) commented, possessions in Hong Kong are viewed as contributing to a socially appropriate appearance. People tend to wear branded products in order to gain social recognition (e.g. social status) from others.

> *"Once they have succeeded in this, given the concentration of wealth in a geographically confined area, they need to show these achievements through the possession of publicly visible luxuries in terms of expensive automobiles, ostentatious jewellery, clothes, and rare antiques. In this way, they show themselves to be exemplars of Chinese achievers possessing the best that Western societies have to offer. However, when the superachievers begin their conspicuous consumption, the effects cascade down to people in middle and lower income segments, who feel the pressure to keep up" (p. 110 – 112)*

Thirdly, people's motivation to display wealth through their consumption and possessions is related to pressure to conform. Chinese consumers are under pressure to be part of the in-group (Tse 1996) and to keep up with their peers so that they do not lose face. Wong and

Ahuvia (1988) indicated the differences between consumers from western societies and East Asian societies in terms of their conspicuous consumption behaviour,

> *"Whereas in Western culture there is a greater tendency for people to conspicuously consume luxuries because they want to (i.e. the products reflect private preferences), in the East Asian Confucian societies, there is a greater tendency for people to behave this way because they feel they have to (i.e. products conform to social norms) (p. 433)*

2.7.5 Gifts (Gift-receipts and Self-gifts) as Possessions

Gift-receipts and self-gifts are often viewed as part of people's important or favourite possessions (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, Richins 1994b, Wallendorf and Arnould 1988, Dittmar 1989). Because gifts are seen as a part of the giver's extended self (Belk 1988), gift-recipients receive not only a gift from the gift-giver but also part of gift-giver's self as Belk and Coon (1991) noted "… gifts as giving part of self" (p. 526). Gift-giving has been studied for decades in anthropology (i.e. the economic reciprocity exchange), sociology (i.e. the social exchange) and psychology (i.e. the motivation of reciprocity exchange) (Mauss 1954, Homans 1961, Schwartz 1967). In this section, I will review the literature on gift-receipts in consumer research followed by the literature on self-gifts. Both these literatures are related to this study.

In marketing, Sherry (1983) developed an analysis of consumer gift giving from an anthropological perspective. He proposed a three-stage framework of the gift-giving process. The three-stage framework involves the gestation stage (i.e. searching for, choosing and buying a gift), then the presentation stage (i.e. the time and place of the actual exchange) through to the final stage of reformulation (i.e. realignment and reformulation of the relationships between the gift-giver and gift-recipient). Based on the study of the Napster

music file sharing network, Giesler (2006) critiqued Sherry's (1983) framework arguing that a single gifting spiral framework over-looked the complexity of consumer gift systems. Giesler (2006) argued that a gift system consists of at least three theoretical key elements. Firstly, "social distinctions are demonstrated through patterns of interaction that give rise to, and subsequently reinforce, gifting partners' self-identification... in the gift system and its social environment." (p. 284). Secondly, a gift system involves a set of rules and obligations that shapes the complexity of gift-exchange. Thirdly, the gift system is guided by the existence of rituals and symbolism. Individuals create and define rituals embedded in societal and cultural shared symbols "... by which the collective representations of gift giving are instilled into its members" (Giesler 2006: 284). For instance, Caplow (1982) examined the Christmas gift-giving ritual in kin networks and Joy (2001) studied the ritualized giving of red packet money in kin and friendship networks during Chinese New Year. Both rituals of giving serve the purpose of strengthening social relationships in the networks.

Gifts carry many emotional and symbolic meanings including love (Belk and Coon 1993, Fischer and Arnold 1990) and sadness (Mick and Demoss 1990b, Mick and Demoss 1990a). In the light of relationships between givers and recipients, and consumer gift giving, Ruth et al. (1999) explored how gift-recipients align their interpersonal relationships with the gift-givers through gifts and Lowrey et al. (2004) conceptualized ten social factors that influence gift-giving from the gift-recipients' perspective. Wong and Hogg (2009) further examined gift-recipients' perspectives on gift-giving in relation to changes in self and interpersonal relationships over time. Consistent with the nature of possessions, the meaning of gifts changes and evolves according to people's life experiences and social contexts.

In addition, not all gift-exchanges involve reciprocal exchange. For example, Belk and Coon (1993) identified gift-giving among dating couples as agapic ("unselfish") love gift-giving

and suggested that reciprocal exchange is not a requisite feature of gift-giving between lovers. Similar findings were identified in studies of romantic couples in Minowa and Gould's Japanese empirical data (1999) and Joy's study of the gift system as a continuum of social ties in Hong Kong (2001).

Unlike gift-exchange which involves different people as givers and recipients, there is another kind of gifts called "self gifts", where people buy gifts for themselves. In other words, they are not only the giver of the gifts but also the recipients of the gifts. Self-gifts are defined as "personally symbolic self-communication through special indulgences that tend to be premeditated and highly context bound" (Mick and Demoss 1990a: 328). Studies in self and possessions have shown that people sometimes regarded self-gift objects as among their important possessions (Richins 1994a, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Although the nature of self-gifts and interpersonal gifts are different, they share similar dimensions in terms of the meanings of gifts (communication, exchange and specialness). The parallel dimensions between interpersonal gifts and self-gifts are set out in the following table (Table 2.6).

Dimension	Interpersonal Gifts	Self-Gifts
Communication	Symbolic messages between giver and receiver (thoughts and feeling), including the giver's impressions about the identities of both parties	Personally symbolic self-dialogue concerning affective self-regard and self-concepts; primary themes: self esteem and identity
Exchange	Social obligations to give, receive and repay, predicating and optimizing human behaviour	Indulgences justified by effortful behaviour and performance behaviour propelled by self-bargains for indulgences; primary theme: deserving
Specialness	Extra meaningfulness facilitated by the conjoining of giver, receiver and gift through deep emotions, culturally established rituals and values, and other qualities of sacredness	Extra meaningfulness based on the uncommonness, particularity, function, or sacred aspects of self-gifts; primary themes: perfect thing, escape, discovery and deserving

Table 2.6: Parallel Dimensions between Interpersonal Gifts and Self-gifts (Source: Mick & Demoss 1990: 325)

In the communication dimension, a consumer communicates and conveys messages between different selves (e.g. actual self to ideal self) as a giver and a receiver (self-dialogue) ranging from congratulating one-self to consoling another self. In addition, self-gifts in the exchange dimension can act as self-contracts that consumers use to justify their self-gift purchases or indulgences because they deserve them after all their hard work. Self-gifts also appear in the specialness dimension serving "the uncommonness, particularity, functional or sacred aspects of self-gifts" (Mick and Demoss 1990a: 325). The extra meaningfulness of self-gifts appears in such themes as "perfect thing, escape, discovery and deserving".

Apart from these three dimensions of self-gifts (i.e. communication, exchange and specialness), Mick and Demoss (1990a) also suggested other types of self-gifts. For example, therapeutic self-gifts serve as "consolation prizes for disappointment or upsets" or for

relieving stress (Tournier 1966: 6). This type of self-gift tends to be less practical and more relaxing. Holiday self-gifts (e.g. birthdays, festive seasons, travelling) are relatively more context bound (e.g. a person's birthday, a Christmas present) and appear on special occasions (e.g. a wedding anniversary gift). This kind of self-gift is comparatively more memorable.

2.7.5.1 Gift-giving in the Chinese Context

This study examines how informants reveal their sense of self through stories about their important possessions. Gifts are often regarded as people's possessions (Belk 1988, Belk Coon 1992). Gift-giving plays a significant role in Chinese culture. Yan (1996) noted, "Gift exchange, while existing in all societies, appears to be central to Chinese culture throughout its long history" (p. 14). As Chinese society tends to place emphasis on connectedness and togetherness in networks of interpersonal relationships, gift-giving serves as a means for establishing, maintaining, reproducing and modifying interpersonal relationships (Yan 1996, Yang 1963). In addition, Chinese cultural values influence Chinese gift-giving behaviours. (Yau et al. 1999). For example, Chinese tend to buy expensive gifts for people who are on the higher level of the five cardinal hierarchy (e.g. parents and head teachers) in order to show their respect (Yan 1996).

Gift-giving behaviour is largely influenced by society (Wang et al. 2001) and culture (Hill and Rom 1996). Gift-giving plays a substantial part in Chinese culture in terms of maintaining, harmonizing and enhancing interpersonal relationships in social systems (Wong & Ahuvia 1998, Belk and Coon 1993). As Yang (1994) noted the importance of gift-giving in Chinese society is the "primacy and binding power of personal relationships and their importance in meeting the needs and desires of everyday life" (p. 6). Chinese consumers often use gift-giving as a means to establish their webs of relationships "little of you in me

and a little of me in you" (Yang 1994: 297) and express implicit messages of their appreciation of and affection for their close others (Wang et al. 2001).

There are certain norms in Chinese gift-giving that consumers tacitly follow (Yau 1988). Giving luxury goods as gifts is one of the norms and characteristics of Chinese gift-giving (Belk 1996b). Luxury goods contain two important symbolic messages in the gift-exchange. First, a message of "this fine product is appropriate for you" (Wong and Ahuvia 1998: 434) is embedded in the luxury goods for gift-recipients. Second, luxury gifts are expensive enough for givers to gain face "...giving expensive luxury goods brings honour to the gift-givers by displaying his or her ability to afford to give the gift" (p. 434).

"Face" refers to self-presentation where individuals try to live up to others' expectations and fulfil their role or obligations. At the same time, they avoid situations that cause them to lose face (e.g. being humiliated in front of the others). A loss of face not only brings shame to the individuals (Yeung and Tung 1996, Lindridge and Wang 2008, Bedford and Hwang 2003). As Brown and Levinson (1987) noted that "face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (p. 66). The concept of "face" can be found in different contexts (e.g. gift-exchange, attending formal gatherings or business negotiations). "Face" is an active process involving others and social interactions (Goffman 1955). The concept of face also coerces in-group members in Chinese society to display their expensive possessions (e.g. branded cars, expensive jewellery, pens or handbags) conspicuously in order to indicate their achievement and success and reflect their social status (Zheng 1992).

In terms of establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships in Chinese societies, gift-giving is used as a means to deliver love, affection or appreciation to one another. According

to Wang et al.'s (2001) empirical findings, the large majority of consumers in China use gift-giving as an outlet to express their love, affection, care or appreciation for someone that they care about. Their findings are consistent with Yang's (1994) and Joy's (2001) suggestion that the purposes of gift-giving to each other are to balance social relationships and show sentiment. In addition, Joy et al. (2006) explored self-giving in Hong Kong using Mick and Demoss's (1990a) typology and concluded that Hong Kong Chinese consumers seem to have a wider interpretation of what constitutes a self-gift. In contrast to the Western interpretation of self-gift that is related to self-indulgence or giving rewards to oneself, people in Hong Kong in Joy et al.'s study (2006) viewed self-gift as rewards that they shared with close others. Using an example from Joy et al.'s study (2006), one of the participants in their study justified the reason why he bought "... a Mercedes Benz as a reward for professional achievement (independent self, adding that the car was to be used not just by him but by the entire family (the relational self)" (p. 116). The blurred boundary of the self-gift in Joy et al.'s (2006) study is in line with Markus and Kitayama's (1991) suggestion that the self among Chinese is flexible and porous so that they can include close others or in-groups in the concept of the self. To summarize, this section offers readers a general view of the norms and functions of gift-giving in the Chinese context that is related to this study.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed literature from in three main areas; *the self from the cultural psychological and the social psychological perspective, the interrelationship between the self and possessions,* and *possessions from the perspectives of social psychology and consumer research.* This literature review highlighted a number of gaps in the research on interrelationships between the self and possessions that could receive additional in-depth attention.

(1) How individual consumers reveal their sense of the self in relation to significant others and in-groups, i.e. the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) is underexplored in consumer research as most of the consumer research has focused on studying the differences between the independent and interdependent self-construals in relation to consumer behaviours (e.g. Aaker and Schmitt 2001, Ng and Houston 2006).

(2) How the trichotomization of the self (the personal, relational, collective dimensions of the self) (Brewer and Gardner 1996) coexists within an individual consumer remains largely unexplored (Higgins and May 2001).

(3) Studies of the meaning of possessions in a non-Western context are called for more exploration (Belk 1984, Bih 1992, Piron 2006, Eckhardt and Houston 2001).

Possessions and the self are closely linked together as "our sense of identity, our self-definition, are established, maintained, reproduced and transformed" (Dittmar 1992: 86) through storytelling about possessions. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) also commented that "things tell us who I are, not in words but by embodying our intentions. In our everyday traffic of existence, we can also learn about ourselves from objects, almost as

much as from people." (p. 91) Having identified these gaps in the literature, the objectives of this thesis are fourfold:

1) To examine the personal and sociocultural influences on informants' life worlds that affect the construction of their narratives about important possessions

2) To identify and map out informants' patterns of the self in the light of the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) in relation to their possession stories

3) To explore informants' meanings of possessions and the self-possession boundary in a non-western context

4) To develop and propose a framework based on the empirical findings of this study that extends current understanding on how different dimensions of the self (personal, relational, collective) coexist and are configured in relation to possessions

Having reviewed the literature on the self and possessions in relation to consumer behaviour, I summarize them in the following table (Table 2.7) in order to establish the foundations for this study. The aim of this study is to investigate how Chinese consumers reveal their selves through storytelling about their important possessions. Based on the literature review, this study focuses on the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self (Brewer Gardner 1996) in relation to consumption and possessions and investigates how informants reveal their patterns of self. In addition, the meanings and boundaries of possessions will be explored in this study.

Concepts	Authors
1. The trichotomization of the self (the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self)	Brewer and Gardner (1996), Markus and Kitayama (1991)
2. The coexistence of the independent and interdependent self-construals within individuals	Aaker & Schmitt 2001, Ng & Houston (2006), Trianids 1995, Brewer and Gardner (1996), Swaminathan et al. (2007), Aaker & Lee (2001), Zhang & Shrum (2001),
3. The influence of interdependent self-construal on consumption behaviours	Wong & Ahuvia (1998), Aaker & Schmitt (2001), Ng & Houston (2006), Swaminathn et al. (2007), Zhang and Shrum (2009)
4. A broader interpretation of possessions among Chinese consumers (e.g. tangible and intangible objects)	Ross 1991, Bih 1992, Piron 2006, Eckhardt and Houston (2001)

Table 2.7: Foundations of This Study

Having reviewed the literature, identified the gaps and established the foundations for this study, I will now move on to Chapter 3 where I discuss firstly the philosophical assumptions that lie behind my study, and secondly my theoretical perspective, followed by a discussion of the methodology and methods I used in this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Researchers' philosophical assumptions guide their methodological choices and research approaches (i.e. quantitative, qualitative, mixed method approaches) (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008, Crotty 2003). Philosophical assumptions are addressed via debates about ontology and epistemology (Crotty 2003), worldviews (Creswell 2003) or paradigms (Lincoln and Guba 2000). A paradigm is "a basic set of beliefs that guide action" (Guba 1990:17). "Good research requires making these assumptions, paradigms, and frameworks explicit in the writing of a study, and at a minimum, to be aware that they influence the conduct of inquiry" (Creswell 2007: 15). It is essential for researchers to explain how their philosophical assumptions influence and inform their theoretical perspectives, choice of methodology and the subsequent decisions about methods to use in their study. As Guba and Lincoln (1994) note "questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm, which we define as the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways" (p. 105).

It has been argued that different labelling and classifications in explaining research philosophies cause confusion and problems for researchers seeking to elucidate their research positions (Schwandt 2003, Creswell 2003). As Table 3.1 illustrates, "some philosophical terms are used interchangeably and consequently there is confusion about their meaning" (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008: 60). For example, Crotty's research framework consists of four interrelated hierarchical levels: epistemology (& ontology), theoretical perspective, methodology and method. Crotty (2003) argues that ontology and epistemology tend to "emerge together" and "ontology would sit alongside epistemology informing the theoretical perspective" (p. 10). Ontology involves philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality

whereas epistemology involves assumptions about "the best ways of inquiring into the nature

of the world" (Easterby-Smith 2008: 60). The second level in Crotty (2003) is theoretical

perspective involving philosophical stance that lies behind the methodology. The third level

is methodology which involves the strategies or plans that "govern our choice and use of

methods" (Creswell 2003: 5) and the fourth level is methods that are the techniques and

procedures used in data collection and analysis.

Crotty (2003)	Epistemology (& Ontology)	Theoretical Perspective	Methodology	Methods
Creswell (2003)	Alternative Knowledge Claims		Strategies of Inquiry	Methods
Easterby-Smith et al. (2008)	Epistemology	Ontology	Methodology	Methods

Table 3.1 Taxonomy of Research Frameworks: Terms Used Interchangeably by Crotty (2003:5), Creswell (2003: 13) and Easterby-Smith et al. (2008: 60)

Creswell (2003) offers another classification that is similar to Crotty's framework (2003).

Creswell (2003) re-conceptualized Crotty's framework and suggested three elements of

inquiry. The first element is called alternative knowledge claims that are the equivalent to the

combination of Crotty's ontology, epistemology and theoretical perspective (i.e. the first and

second levels of Crotty's research framework). The second element is called strategies of

inquiry (equivalent to Crotty's methodology) that "provide specific direction for procedures

in a research design" (p. 13). The third element is termed methods that are related to data

collection and data analysis.

In addition, Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) have their own taxonomy of research framework

that contains four hierarchical levels that are different from Crotty's (2003) framework. As

Table 3.1 shows, the first level of Easterby-Smith et al.'s (2008) research framework is

ontology that equates to Crotty's use of theoretical perspective. The second level is epistemology and the third level is methodology, that is the "combination of techniques used to enquire into a specific situation" (p. 60) and the fourth level is methods that refer to techniques for sampling, data collection and analysis.

Due to the confusion that can be caused by inconsistency in labelling and classification within research frameworks, I decided to use Crotty's (2003) research framework scaffolding approach (Table 3.2) in explaining my research philosophy (i.e. ontology and epistemology), theoretical perspective, methodology and methods in this chapter. Crotty's (2003) scaffolding research framework provides a clear structure that consists of four interrelated hierarchical levels, "ranging from the broad assumptions that are brought to a project to the more practical decisions made about how to collect and analyse data" (Creswell 2003: 5). Figure 3.1 shows my chosen approach at each level using Crotty's (2003) research framework.

Epistemology (& Ontology)	Theoretical Perspective	Methodology	Methods
- Objectivism - Constructionism - Subjectivism	- Positivism (and post-positivism) - Interpretivism *Symbolic interactionism *Phenomenology *Hermeneutics - Critical inquiry - Feminism - Postmodernism, etc.	- Experimental research - Survey research - Ethnography - Phenomenological research - Grounded theory - Heuristic inquiry - Action research - Discourse analysis - Feminist standpoint research, etc.	- Sampling - Measurement and scaling - Questionnaire - Observation *Participant *Non-participant - Interview - Focus group - Case study - Life history - Narrative - Visual ethnography methods - Statistical analysis - Content analysis - Conversation analysis, etc.

Table 3.2: Crotty's Taxonomy of Research Framework (Source: Crotty 2003: 5)

Epistemology (& Ontology) ➡ Constructionism

Theoretical perspective ➡ Interpretivism: symbolic interactionism

Methodology ➡ Narrative Inquiry

Methods ➡ Interviews & Narratives
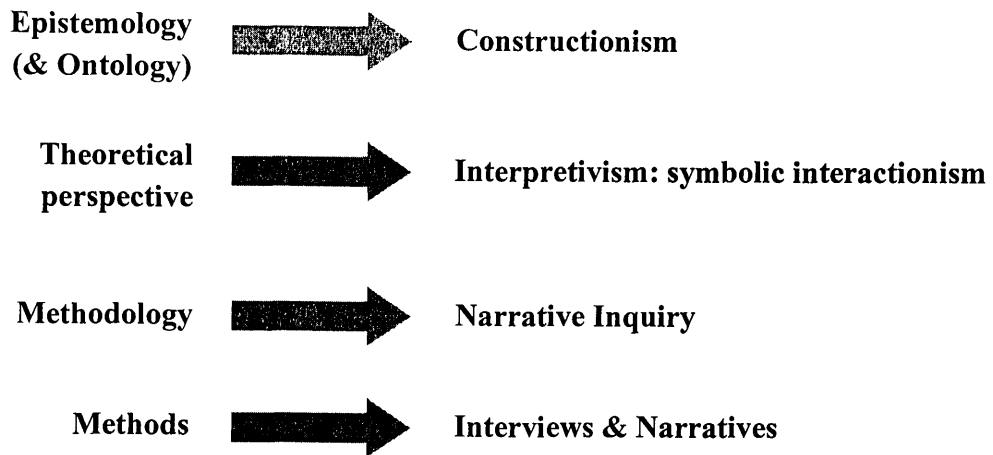
Figure 3.1: Research Approach in This Study (Adapted from Crotty 2003)

In this chapter, I will start with a discussion of my ontological/ epistemological assumptions in my research: constructionism (Section 3.2). Then I will discuss my theoretical perspective: interpretivism (Section 3.3) which lies behind my methodology. In addition, I will explain my methodology, narrative inquiry, in Section 3.4 and the methods I used for collecting and analyzing data. A detailed description of interviewing informants and analyzing the data will be offered in Section 3.5.

3.2 Ontology & Epistemology: Constructionism

The ontological and epistemological position of my study aligns with constructionism. Early forms of constructionist thought were developed under the influence of Mead (1934/ 1962) who suggested that "meanings are constructed in and through interaction" (Bryman 2001: 18). Crotty (2003) defines constructionism as

> "... *the view that all knowledge and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (p. 42).*

Social constructionism extends constructionism into cultural settings (Crotty 2003, Burr 2003, Gergen 1973). Crotty (2003) notes "social constructionism emphasises the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way in which we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world" (p. 58). The idea of social constructionism was developed by Berger and Luckmann (1967). Social constructionism suggests that people construct the meanings of experiences and their worlds in order to understand the world that they are living in. Creswell (2007) provides a further explanation of social constructionism.

> *"People develop subjective meanings of their experiences – meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple... Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (Creswell 2007: 21)*

In terms of the ontological question of "reality", social constructionists reject the idea that people's understanding of the world is derived from objective "reality" determined by

objective and external factors. In contrast, social constructionists seek for understanding of how people construct and interpret their world as they engage in it (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008, Creswell 2007). Symbols, objects and actions in the social world become "real" to individuals once they acquire meanings for them (Shankar et al. 2001). As Burr (2003) notes "if our knowledge of the world, our common ways of understanding it, is not derived from the nature of the world as it really is, where does it come from? The social constructionist answer is that people construct it between them" (p. 4).

In addition, social constructionists acknowledge that there are pre-existing entities in the world that people live in. As Crotty (2003) argues "we do not create meaning. We construct meaning. We have something to work with ... the world is already there" (p. 44). People construct meanings from their experiences and make sense of the world based on their social, cultural and historical backgrounds. People are born into the world where social structures, cultural norms and categories are set and imposed on them. As Burr (2003) argues "our shared use of this symbolic system constructs huge social structures that appear to have an existence and an origin outside of our own human activity but which are inevitable human constructions" (p. 186).

Berger and Luckmann (1967) regarded the dualism of the individual and society as one of the important aspects of social constructionism. It is a dialectical process which means that people are actively constructing the social world (e.g. introducing new laws, inventing new products) and at the same time they are constrained by the world/ society (e.g. laws, rules and customs established by previous generations). "All knowledge and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human begins and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty 2003: 21). In other words, realities are socially and culturally constructed by individuals but are shaped and influenced by the social and cultural

world they live in (Murray and Ozanne 1991). In line with this argument, this study investigates how Chinese consumers construct their sense of self in the Hong Kong Chinese society. The social and cultural backgrounds of Chinese society influence Chinese consumers' interpretation of their sense of self and construction of meanings from their experiences.

3.2.1 The Self in Social Constructionism

Social constructionists (Berger and Luckmann 1967, Gergen 1999) argue that people construct multiple, fragmented and incoherent selves in discourse. However, "our subjective experience is often the opposite; we still feel that there is coherence to the person we are, that bears themes both historically and across the different areas of our lives that give us this sense of self." (Burr 2003: 141). Burr (2003) suggests that memory and storytelling – "the self in narrative" (p. 141) play important roles in constructing coherent selves. Burr (2003) explains,

> *"Memory allows us to look back on our behaviours and experiences, to select those that seem to "hang together" in some narrative framework, literally the story of our lives, and to look for patterns, repetitions and so on that provided us with the impression of continuity and coherence" (Burr 2003: 142)*

In line with Burr (2003), Sarbin (1986) and Crossley (2000, 2003) agree that our lives do not have an "implicit contract toward order" (p.9). Our lives consist of fragmented events and narrative is like a thread to link up meanings from these fragmented events. Social constructionists emphasize the use of language in constructing the sense of self. Narratives help us to reorganise and to select coherent elements from our memories in order to craft our stories (Murray 2004). These stories provide a sense of consistency and continuity in constructing our selves. The stories that we construct are continually changing through everyday participation and interactions with one another (Gergen 1999). I will discuss the

interrelations between the self and narrative in detail in Section 3.4 (Methodology: Narrative Inquiry).

3.3 Theoretical Perspective: Interpretivism

I discussed social constructionism as my ontology and epistemology in this study in the previous section and now move on to the second level of Crotty's (2003) framework: theoretical perspective. "Theoretical perspective" is taken here to indicate the philosophical stance that lies behind my methodology. The theoretical perspective provides "a context for the process involved and a basis for its logic and its criteria" (Crotty 2003: 66). Interpretivism seeks for understanding of how people interpret their social world (Calder and Tybout 1987) rather than searching for generalisable explanations as scientists working within the paradigm of positivism (Ozanne and Hudson 1989). In other words, "interpretivists reject the idea of a universal value free explanation derived from scientific method and regard interpretation as the key to understanding people's interactions and participation in their social world" (Szmigin and Foxall 2000).

The origin of interpretivism is often linked to Weber (1864 – 1920), who advocated the idea that human sciences should be linked to *Verstehen* (understanding) rather than prediction and explanation (*Erklaren*, explaining) (Crotty 2003, Schwandt 2003). "This has been taken to mean that Weber is contrasting the interpretative approach (*Verstehen*, understanding) needed in the human and social sciences with the explicative approach (*Erklaren*, explaining), focused on causality, that is found in the natural sciences" (Crotty 2003: 67). Interpretivists argue that human and social sciences (in Windelband's term *idiographic*) (cited in Crotty 2003) are different from the natural sciences (*nomothetic*). Using Rickert's terms (1863 – 1936) (cited in Crotty 2003), interpretivists suggest an *individualising* method in human and

social sciences compared with a *generalising* method in the natural sciences (Crotty 2003). Interpretivists focus on understanding how people interpret meanings in their social world.

The aim for interpretivist researchers is to "try to make sense of the participants who are trying to make sense of their world" (Smith and Osborn 2003). In addition, interpretivist researchers acknowledge that their social, historical and cultural backgrounds and personal experiences shape their interpretation of what they find and investigate in their research. "The researcher's intention is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world. This is why qualitative research is often called "interpretive" research" (Creswell 2007: 21). The positivist paradigm has played a dominant role in consumer research. However, the "interpretive turn" in consumer research started to emerge in the late 1980s (Sherry 1991) with various labels, from broad concepts (e.g. "naturalistic" (Belk et al. 1988) and "interpretive" (Hirschman 1988) to specific concepts (e.g. "phenomenological" (Thompson et al. 1990) and "narrative" (Ahuvia 2005).

3.3.1 Symbolic Interactionism: a Form of Interpretivism

Symbolic interactionism, one of the forms of interpretivism, focuses on people's interpretation of meanings in the social world through the use of symbols in communication and people's construction of the self in the process of social interactions, most importantly through language (Crotty 2003, Burr 2003). As Bryman (2001) notes, "symbolic interactionists argue that interaction takes place in such a way that the individual is continually interpreting the symbolic meanings of his or her environment (which includes the actions of others) and acts on the basis of this imputed meaning" (p. 15)

The concept of symbolic interactionism originated from the American pragmatists: Mead (1934), Cooley (1902) and Dewey (1982). Blumer (1992), who was a student of Mead, introduced the term symbolic interactionism and listed three premises about the nature of

symbolic interactionism. First, "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things" Second, "the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and the society". Third, "these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/ she encounters" (Blumer 1992: 2). In other words, people interact with one another and interpret the meanings of things and events around them in the process of social interactions – "human society consists of people engaging in action" (Blumer 1992:7).

In addition, Griffin (1997) proposes three core components (meaning, language and thought) in people's social interactions. Meaning refers to the construction of meanings of objects or events in social interactions. Secondly, language is related to how people use symbols to communicate and negotiate the meanings of things and events around them. Thirdly, thought is people's ability to reflect on their experiences. It is people's mental state that constructs the concept of the self (e.g. Cooley's "the looking-glass self") in the process of interactions; and interprets meanings behind social actions – the symbolic content of interactionism (Davies 1999). As Burr (2003) notes "the key to the development of mind is something distinctly human; our ability to use symbols to represent things and events, especially our use of language" (p. 193). In line with the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, this study explores how Hong Kong Chinese consumers, being influenced and shaped by their culture and society, make sense of the world and construct the self through the use of symbols in interaction and communication with one another.

3.3.1.1 Symbolic Interactionism and Self

In the light of how individuals construe their sense of self, a symbolic interactionism approach provides one way of providing an explanation in order to understand one self in relation to others, and the world. This study embraces the notion of symbolic interactionism in relation to the self and attempts to understand how consumers from the Chinese society reveal their sense of self in relation to significant others and groups through the symbolic meanings that they attribute to their important possessions. As Pierce et al. (2003) noted "the symbolic interactionism and the social constructionism perspectives (e.g. Mead 1934) provide valuable insights into the process of self-identity and its connection with possessions." (p. 89). The sense of self is constructed and influenced through interactions with others or groups in the same cultural setting. Solomon (1983) noted, "Symbolic interactionism focuses on the process by which individuals understand their world" (p. 320).

The symbolic interactionists emphasize the importance of others in constructing one's self-concept. People view themselves from the perspective of the others. As Dittmar (1992) commented,

"Self awareness means that the self becomes the object of reflection. This requires the capacity for self-reference and the development of role-taking abilities, both of which become possible only in the context of socially shared meaning systems where self, others and objects in the environment can be designated and represented symbolically"

(Dittmar 1992: 75)

In relation to the self and possessions, Dittmar (1992) conceptualized material possessions in terms of three types of social reality: objective social reality, subjective social reality and symbolic social reality (see Figure 3.2). Individuals reflectively construct their reality and

reveal their sense of self through constellations of their possessions and consumption in their social interactions with others. Dittmar's (1992) conceptualization explained how individuals use their possessions, linking these to interrelated social realities. Symbolic social reality and subjective social reality are predominantly significant in this study as for my interpretivist approach I am interested in how individuals subjectively construct their social world and are able to convey their sense of self to others through their stories about their important possessions.

Objective social reality

Representation of the physical,
quantitative and qualitative features
of material objects as existing outside
individuals

Symbolic social reality

Material objects constitute a system
of socially shared symbols,
particularly symbols of identity

Subjective social reality

Objective and symbolic aspects of
material possessions are merged and
represented as manifestations of
identity in each individual's
understanding

Figure 3.2: Material Possessions in Three Types of Social Reality (Dittmar 1992: 167)

3.4 Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

"A man is always a teller of tales.

He lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others.

He sees everything that happens to him through those stories.

And he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story" (Sartre 1964: 29)

Having outlined interpretivism and specifically symbolic interactionism as my theoretical perspective in the previous section, I move on to the third level of Crotty's (2003) framework – methodology. In line with the social constructionist perspective, "meaning is not inherent in an act or experience but is constructed through social discourse" (McAdams et al. 2001: xi). In this study, I use narrative inquiry as the basis of my research design for collecting and analysing my data. Narratives are social products of our social interaction with others and help us make sense of the world (Gergen and Gergen 1984). As Murray (2003) argues "not only do we conceive of ourselves, to our world, but also narrative is central to how we conceive of ourselves, to our identity. It is through narrative that we not only construct a particular connectedness in our actions but also distinguish ourselves from others" (p. 112).

Narrative inquiry is one of the interpretivist approaches that views interviews as places "where specific social and interactive functions are being performed" (Crossley 2000: 87). Narrative inquiry provides a rich framework through which researchers can investigate the ways "humans experience the world depicted through their stories" (Webster and Mertova 2007: 1). Narrative researchers are not interested in informants' responses to specific questions in searching for their feelings or attitudes. Researchers are more interested in positive or negative responses about self presentation, about how informants look at themselves and what sort of identities they are trying to project to audiences. As Creswell

(2005) argues "telling stories is a natural part of life, and individuals all have stories about their experiences to tell others. In this way, narrative research captures an everyday, normal form of data that is familiar to individuals" (p. 474).

In this section, I will first briefly explain the history of narrative inquiry (Section 3.4.1) in order to establish the context for this study. Then I will elucidate characteristics of narrative (Section 3.4.2) and narrative in relation to cultural context (Section 3.4.3), and thus I identify how these two sections link with my study. Finally, I will discuss narrative inquiry as an interpretive tool in consumer research (Section 3.4.4) in order to explain the advantage of using narrative inquiry in this study.

3.4.1 History of Narrative Inquiry

"The roots of contemporary narrative inquiry lie in literary theory, sociolinguistics, psychology and anthropology. Most narrative work adopts a constructionist understanding of discourse, or narrative, as constitutive of the world" (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 42). Contemporary accounts of narrative inquiry start with Propp's famous study of morphology of the Russian fairytale in 1928 (Czarniawska 2004). Propp's book was translated into English in 1958 and has established a foundation for analysing narratives and has influenced scholars in narrative structuralist analysis. Narratives in the 1960s focused on structural analysis in terms of the usage and structures of stories. The socio-linguists Labov and Waletzky (1967) took on Propp's method and developed the structural analysis. In 1972, Labov published a book "Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black English Vernacular" introducing a definition of a simple narrative and six criteria in their structural analysis in narratives, i.e. abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda when analysing oral narratives.

Narratives in social sciences can be traced back to the early 1980s with Bertaux's (1981) edited collection Biography and Society that drew attention to stories in sociology (Elliott 2005). In psychology, psychologists are interested in how self is constructed in narratives. McAdams (1985) developed an autobiographical method of exploration, i.e. describing life as a book with chapters. Each chapter, i.e. chapters of childhood, adolescent and adult, has different experiences and memories. McAdams (1985) suggests that "we make or create ourselves through narrative" (p. 13). By telling a story, we define who we were in the past, who we are at present and who we may be or wish to become in the future.

Apart from McAdams's contributions to narrative in psychology, Bruner (1986, 1990) and Polkinghorne (1988) also advocated the use of narratives in their research in psychology. Bruner (1986, 1990) has two influential books in the field of psychology, i.e. *Actual Minds: Possible Worlds* (1986) and *Acts of Meaning* (1990). Bruner believes there are two forms of thinking: paradigmatic thinking based on classification and categorization, and narrative thinking, which helps us interpret events and experiences in storied formats and make sense about the world and who we are. Polkinghorne (1988) investigated how psychotherapy practitioners use narrative in their work and commented that "they are concerned with people's stories: they work with case histories and use narrative explanations to understand why the people they work with behave the way they do" (p. ix.). According to Polkinghorne's (1988) investigation, there are 2 types of narratives: descriptive and explanatory. The purpose of descriptive narrative is to try to make an accurate description of informants, whereas the explanatory narrative is to find out some causal sense of connection between events as told by informants. Similar to the explanatory narrative, my study examines how informants make sense of their experiences in their lives through their storytelling about their important possessions. Storytelling helps them to relive and reorganise the events that happened in the

past and that still carry significant meanings in their lives in the present, revealing different aspects of the self.

Narrative inquiry has been recently applied in the marketing discipline. Fournier (1998) investigated the relationship between consumers and their brands by interviewing 3 women at different life stages. She conducted her interviews with her informants in their kitchens asking them to tell a story behind any brand in their kitchen cupboards. She collected 112 brand stories for idiographic and cross-case analysis. Escalas (2004: 168) suggests that "narrative processing creates or enhances self-brand connections (SBC) because people generally interpret the meaning of their experiences by fitting them into a story." In addition, Ahuvia (2005) investigated the relationship between loved possessions and narrative identity construction and found that consumers' loved objects, to a certain extent, reveal their identity conflicts. Narrative inquiry has received increasing attention in consumer research. As Shankar et al. (2001) note "narrative is being used as an interpretive tool to aid our understanding of the way consumers structure their consumption experiences and so make sense of this particular aspects of their lives" (p. 434). In my study, I use narrative inquiry as the basis of my research design in order to collect and analyse empirical data. Informants reveal their sense of self and meanings of possessions through the construction of stories about their important possessions.

3.4.2 Characteristics of Narratives

The issue of narrative, self and time is particularly important for my study as I investigate how informants define their sense of self through their stories about their important possessions. Different aspects of the self (i.e. the past self, the present self and the future self) are revealed in informants' storytelling and offer me, as a narrative researcher, an opportunity to understand their world. This study uses narratives as a method of inquiry to collect informants' stories about their important possessions. In this section, characteristics of narratives will be discussed in the light of organization of informants' fragmented events, construction of their sense of self, narrative as an on-going dialogical process, and temporality in storytelling.

3.4.2.1 Organization of Informants' Fragmented Events

The function of narrative is to "bring order to disorder. In telling a story, the narrator is trying to organize the disorganized and to give it meaning" (Murray 2003:112). "People live storied lives" (Creswell 2005: 87). People are natural storytellers who share stories with their friends, family members and colleagues on a daily basis. Narrative helps people organise their thoughts and find out who they are by gathering many fragmented events together (Ricoeur 1988). As McAdams (1985) argues "we are all tellers of tales. We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories" (p. 11). In my study, narratives help my informants to make sense of their world and to link up various fragmented events in a meaningful way with a clear sequence (Hinchman and Hinchman 1997) so that "they organise life, i.e. social relations ... [and] interpretations of the past, present and future" (Daiute and Lightfoot 2004: xi).

3.4.2.2 Construction of Informants' Sense of Self

Not only are narratives a tool to help us gather our thoughts and express ourselves in an organised manner, but they also have a distinctive function in constructing self and identities (Haigh and Crowther 2005). Narrative and self have an intertwined relationship. As Murray (2003) argues,

"Narrative not only brings order and meaning to our everyday life but, reflexively, it also provides structure to our very sense of selfhood. We tell stories about our lives to ourselves and to others. As such, we create a narrative identity" (p. 129).

As Mishler (1999) says, "we speak our identities" (p. 19). Selves are embedded in people's narratives as "storied selves" (Sarbin 1986, McAdams 1997) or "narrative selfhood" (McCarthy 2007). People try to make sense of their lives and construct their selves through storytelling as Bamberg (2004: 215) points out, "narratives, irrespective of whether they deal with one's life or an episode or event in the life of someone else, always reveal the speaker's identity." In my study, informants were invited to share stories about their important possessions. The advantage of using narratives in this study is to understand how informants define their sense of self through different stories about their important possessions. As Cortazzi (2001) comments, "through life stories, individuals and groups make sense of themselves; they tell what they are or what they wish to be ..., they are their stories" (p. 388).

3.4.2.3 Narrative as an On-going Dialogical Process

Narrative is not "a static mechanism... It is an ongoing dialogical process" (Georgakopoulou and Goutsos 2004: 45). In the construction of narrative, we seldom tell the same story more than once (Sarbin 1986). Interpretation and evaluation of past events are dynamic and updated according to people's present feelings and experience. Stories are open to further development and change continuously depending on the narrators' experiences and life stages

(Hollway and Jefferson 2000). People's identity "is continuously adapted and at times reformulated through a person's ongoing actions" (Thompson 1997: 447). As Polkinghorne (1988) argues, "the life narrative is open-ended: future actions and occurrences will have to be incorporated into the present plot" (p. 182). In other words, people provide different emphases in stories so that the same event can be presented in different ways, with different interpretations and evaluations depending on narrators' experiences, knowledge and the contexts that the narrators encounter (Haigh and Crowther 2005, McAdams 1997). As Murray (2003) comments,

"In life, all narratives are provisional; they are subject to change as new information becomes available. It is not that the narrator is trying to mislead the listener but rather, from a more extended perspective, different pieces of information become available for the story" (p. 129).

It is important to note that the construction of informants' narratives and interpretation of their events and experiences in this study are continuously modified and updated. In my study, I revisited two informants two years later after the first interview in order to gain more insights into how informants' sense of self had changed or developed in their narratives.

3.4.2.4 Temporality in Storytelling

Earlier studies in narratives showed that temporality in storytelling is important because a temporal sequence gives people a sense of continuity in their construction of self (Baker and Kleine 2004). In this study, informants were invited to share stories about their important possessions revealing their definition the self (i.e. who they were in the past, who they are in the present and who they would like to be in the future) (Schultz et al. 1989, Kleine et al 1995). Narrative and time are inevitably woven together. Informants' stories consist of a temporal plot either with features of a beginning, middle and end or before or after

experience. As Benwell and Stokoe (2006) comment "narration produces a sense of identity coherence by incorporating notions of connectedness and temporal unity" (p.136). By narrating past events at the present time, people can "re-live", reconstruct and re-experience those events again and try to find meanings in them. "The ability to form narratives therefore enables an individual to organise his experience in a way that provides that individual with a sense of himself as an intentional agent with continuity through time" (Elliot 2005: 124). Polkinghorne (1991) coined a term called "emplotment" to explain how narrative, self and time are closely connected, i.e. how selves are embedded in stories with different plot features, and how these features link fragmented events in a story and lead to evaluations and resolutions.

Self-narration gives an opportunity for people to find out who they were in the past and who they are in the present or possibly who they would like to become in the future through narrating their stories. It should be noted that the accuracy of truth in people's stories is not what narrative researchers focus on. As Kerby (1991: 6) comments, ""truth" becomes more a question of a certain adequacy to an implicit meaning of the past than of a historically correct representation or verisimilitude."

In other words, individual narratives are not meant to be treated as historical truth (Riessman 1993, Creswell 2007). In line with Riessman (1993) and Creswell (2007), Atkinson (2007) argues, "historical truth is not the main issue in narrative. What matters is if the life story is deemed trustworthy, more than "true". We are after all, seeking the subjective reality" (p. 234). Atkinson (2007) uses the autobiography of B.B. King (King & Ritz 1996), the great blue singer, to illustrate this point.

"Some may accuse me of remembering wrong. That's okay, because I'm not writing a cold-blooded history. I'm writing a memory of my heart. That's the truth I'm after... following my feelings, no matter where they lead" (p. 2)

3.4.3 Cultural Context in Narrative Inquiry

In line with the assumption of symbolic interactionism, the way a story is told and structured to a large extent will rely on the cultural resources that are available in a group (Kelly and Dickinson 1997, Elliott 2005). People from the same group share similar cultural symbols, discourse and patterns of storytelling. Themes of stories differ culturally depending on an individual's social and cultural background as Brockmeier and Cargaugh (2001) suggest that "our personal stories are profoundly conditioned by our cultural worlds" (p. 287). "Different individual and different social and cultural groups are likely to structure their narratives in different ways" (Georgakopoulou and Goutsos 2004: 56). For example, Confucian values (e.g. respecting the superiors or parents, sacrificing oneself in order to fulfil other's wishes, the virtue of maintaining harmony with one another) are often embedded in Chinese children 'stories that are re-told from generation to generation. People construct their stories in different ways with different settings, plots, sequence, genres and metaphor depending on their culture. When people tell their own stories, their culture has already provided various narrative models including genres, plot structures and metaphoric themes (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001). For example, by saying "once upon a time..." at the beginning of the story, people are expecting a fairytale plot with a happy ending.

This study investigates how Chinese consumers reveal their sense of self through their stories about important possessions. My Chinese informants' cultural background is the backdrop that provides certain settings for their storytelling and their sense of self and identity emerged through this social and cultural interaction (Schiffrin 1996). Narratives provide rich

descriptions in terms of how informants make sense of their experiences and understand the world socially and culturally. The way Chinese informants make sense of their experiences or understand each other is shaped and influenced by the world we are living in, for example, our family cultural background, the education we received, and the structure of the society.

Our experience of self, others and the world is inevitably and inextricably "tied up with our use and understanding of the linguistic and moral resources made available to the cultures we are brought up in" (Crossley 2000: 45). There are certain elements in narration in a culture that have common attributes that a group shares. Therefore, our conversations most of the time are implicit, but people in that group still catch those subtle meanings in conversations. Those implicit meanings are shared by a group of people with similar backgrounds and culture. They are formed through cultural meaning systems such as, conversations in daily life, the media, storytelling or the sharing of experiences with one to another. All this knowledge about myths, fairytales, histories and stories are connected and passed on from generation to generation (Crossley 2000, Polkinghorne 1988, Howard 1991). This heuristic path, as Bruner called it (1996) the "culture of education", is the means whereby people learn how to use different linguistic devices and plots to tell stories, to understand and to evaluate others' stories without introducing excessive background information into their conversations.

Engaging in a conversation and the interpretation of other people's discourse relies not only on the intention of the speakers, but also on other contexts during the conversation. Schiffrin (1994: 364) gives a simple definition of contexts as "a world filled with people producing utterances: people who have social, cultural, and personal identity, knowledge, beliefs, goals and wants, and who interact with one another in various socially and culturally defined situations". People need to have contextualisation cues, i.e. cultural and social background, beliefs, and knowledge as signposts to help them to interpret the activities that they engage in.

In other words, it is an advantage for a researcher from a similar social and cultural background to understand how informants construct their world. Rather than viewing this kind of pre-understanding[4] as biases, the pre-understanding is beneficial for researchers because it "enables rather than constrains interpretation" (Arnold and Fischer 1994: 57). In this study, I am aware that my background as a Hong Kong Chinese researcher should ideally give me an advantage in understanding and interpreting informants' tacit and implicit Chinese cultural meanings and values in their stories.

3.4.4 Narrative Inquiry as an Interpretive Tool in Consumer Research

The conceptualization of self as narrative is one of the major developments in consumer research on identity (Ahuvia 2005, Escalas and Bettman 2003, Fournier 1998, Thompson 1997). Consumer researchers are interested in people's self-developmental process in terms of "stability (i.e. the historical development of a person's sense of self-identity) and change (i.e. a person's ability to redefine his or her history and to incorporate new identity elements into his or her life and self-concept)" (Thompson 1997: 447) and how these are incorporated into people's narratives about consumption and possessions.

The advantage of using narrative inquiry in this study is to enable "the research to access and explore individual identities: the ways in which social actors actively produce narrative accounts and present their selves to others" (Miller 2005: 11). Informants in this study revealed their sense of self through the construction of stories about their important possessions. Some of their stories are related to the personal dimension of the self whereas some of their stories are linked to their relational or collective dimension of the self. In their stories, informants highlighted significant events in the past (the past self) and evaluated what

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[4] "Pre-understanding… acknowledges that any interpretation offered by a researcher is guided by their own personal and socio-culturally situated experience, or "being in the world" (Shankar et al 2001: 443).

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these meant in the present (the present self) and possibly projected their plan into the future (the future self). As Ahuvia (2005) notes,

"In addition to seeing one's identity as a list of attributes (e.g. I am tall, value achievement), these attributes are linked in memory to key episodes in one's life, which in turn are strung together to form a story. This story line allows people to make sense of who they are and provides a connected identity from past, to present, and into possible imagined futures"(p 172).

3.5 Methods

"Stories… collecting them as data and telling them as theory"

(Scott and Scott 2000: 128)

Collecting stories in a natural setting was the method used for this study in order to explore how informants construct their world and revealed their sense of self through their possession storytelling. In this section, I intend to use Hopkinson and Hogg's (2006) action stages in narrative (storied) research to elucidate the methods in my study. Hopkinson and Hogg (2006) outlined nine stages in narrative (storied) research (based on Czarniawska's work 2004) and explained how narrative researchers move from the field of practice (empirical) to the field of research (theoretical) in different stages (Figure 3.3).

In the first stage, narrative researchers choose the type of story to be collected. In the second stage, narrative researchers need to identify informants using sampling strategies. In the third and fourth stage, narrative researchers decide where and how to collect data. Having set these criteria, narrative researchers go to the field to collect stories from informants (stage 5). In the sixth stage, narrative researchers analyse and interpret stories told by informants. After analyzing each informant's stories individually and identifying patterns of themes across

informant' stories in the previous stage, narrative researchers need to write up the stories with "a theorized storyline which convinces readers that it is well grounded in the empirical data" (Hogg and MacLaran 2008: 130) in the seventh stage. Based on the analysis of the empirical data, narrative researchers build a new theory or extend existing theory in the eighth stage and identify the contribution of the study in the final stage.

This section discusses the first six stages. The seventh stage will be demonstrated in Chapters 4, 5 and appendix II. The eighth stage of theory building and contribution of the study will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 6 and the ninth stage of identifying the contribution of study will be presented in Chapters 6 and 7. Table 3.3 summarizes the action stages of what I did in this study. In this section, I will first explain the type of story I intended to collect and how I chose the informants in this study using a snowball technique (stage 1 and stage 2) (Section 3.5.1). Then I will discuss how I interviewed the informants and collected the data (Stage 3 to Stage 5) (Section 3.5.2). Finally, I will elucidate how I analysed the data (Stage 6) (Section 3.5.3).

Figure 3.3: Action stages in storied research:

moving from the field of practice (empirical) to the field of research (theoretical) in using and producing stories for marketing research

Field of practice

1) **Decide** the type of story to be collected (linked to different ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge generation: e.g. critical incident; personal; myth… and the purpose of research)

2) **Identify** the source of stories (informants, respondents, participants)

3) **Choose** context for story telling (interviews; questionnaires)

4) **Provoke** story-telling (different stimuli and prompts…)

5) **Collect** the stories (written, oral, taped, diaries…)

6) **Analyze/ interpret** stories (i.e. what do they say and how do they say it?) (different methods of analysis varying from content analysis, deductive and inductive coding through to impressionistic reading from "part to whole" and "whole to part", within and across stories)

7) **Write up** the stories (cases; coded categories…)

8) **Put together** your own story (theory building/ generation)

9) **Set it** against/ together with other stories (identify contribution of study)

Field of research

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Stages	Description (Hopkinson & Hogg 2006)	Action Stage in this study	As outlined or demonstrated in this thesis
1	Choose the type of story to be collected	I chose to collect stories about important possessions from Chinese informants in order to investigate how they reveal their sense of self.	Section 3.5.1
2	Identify informants using sampling strategies	I first used a purposive sampling (e.g. personal contacts) followed by a snowballing sampling (e.g. acquaintances). 20 informants (10 males and 10 females) were identified.	Section 3.5.1
3	Choose method of collecting stories	I conducted interviews in a natural setting (e.g. home, office).	Section 3.5.2
4	Choose ways to stimulate informants' story-telling	The key interview question was "Tell me five stories about possessions that are important to you". Supporting probes were used in order to provoke storytelling ("When did you get them? How did you get them"	Section 3.5.2
5	Collecting stories from informants in action	All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full and generated 203 pages of interview transcripts. In all, I collected 115 stories about informants' important possessions.	Section 3.5.2
6	Analyse and interpret stories told by informants	Data analysis was undertaken in two stages: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis.	Section 3.5.3
7	Write up the stories	Ten informants' idiographic narratives were analysed and presented in Chapter 4 and the analysis of the other ten informants' narratives were presented in Appendix II. The cross-case analysis generated 11 themes which are discussed in Chapter 5.	Chapters 4, 5 and Appendix II
8	Build a new theory or extend existing theory	Based on the empirical data, I mapped out and conceptualised five patterns of informants' self-configurations. In addition, the phenomenon of *the extended possessions* within the self-possession boundary that emerged form the empirical data was not identified in previous studies. I modified Belk's (1988) theory of possessions and the extended self suggesting Chinese consumers might have a broader interpretation of the self-possession boundary.	Chapters 4 & 6
9	Identify the contributions of the study	The contributions of this study are (1) to map out and conceptualise five patterns of self-configurations based on the empirical data, (2) to build up an extended theoretical framework – a continuum of self-configuration – beyond the empirical data, and (3) to extend Belk's (1988) concept of possessions and the extended self and build a modified framework to explain the wider concept of *possessions* within the wider concept of the self-possession boundary that captures the concept of *extended possessions* within the self-possession boundary in this study.	Chapters 6 & 7

Table 3.3: Action Stages in This Study (Adapted from Hopkinson and Hogg 2006)

3.5.1 Data collection (Stage 1 & Stage 2)

In line with my theoretical perspective of interpretivism, this study draws upon areas of the self, possession and consumption in an East Asian context and examines how informants reveal their sense of self through their stories about their important possessions. In Stage 1, I decided to collect stories about informants' important possessions that reveal their sense of self. Storytelling about their important possessions helped informants make sense of their experiences and construct their worlds.

In terms of identifying informants for this study (Stage 2), I initially used a purposive sampling strategy to identify nine informants (Paul, Jake, Sam, Andrew, Kate, Renay, Ann, Iris and Lucy) for this study. As Saunders et al. (2003) note, "purposive sampling enables you to use your judgement to select cases that will best enable you to answer your research question(s) to meet your objects" (p. 175). Then I used a snowball technique to identify subsequent informants after the purposive sampling. The purpose of the snowball technique is to identify and accumulate informants as each located informant recommends other people to the researchers. These sampling techniques have the advantage of identifying "cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich" (Miles and Huberman 1994: 28). This mixture of personal contacts and approaching acquaintances has been used in social science and consumer research (e.g. Lindridge et al. 2004, McMahon 1995, Malhortra and Birks 1998). In line with previous interpretivist studies in consumer research that focused on a small number of informants (e.g. Ahuvia 2005, Fournier 1998, Eckhardt and Houston 2001, Thompson 2005), 20 informants (10 males and 10 females) were identified for this study.

The informants were young professionals aged between 29 and 42; six informants were single, two informants were divorced and twelve informants were married. Among these twenty informants, six informants were married couples (Peter and Danni, Jake and Shirley, and Winston and Lucy) and 2 informants were a dating couple (Sam and Ada). Table 3.4 summarizes the demographic information of the informants. These informants were purposively chosen to illustrate the variety of different life stages (e.g. single, dating, engaged, married or divorced) of young adults aged 29 – 42 revealing different aspects of the self in their lives through their possession stories (Table 3.4).

No. of Informants	Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Marital Status
(1)	Edward	Male	37	Music Director	Married
(2)	Alan	Male	35	Lecturer	Married
(3)	Sam	Male	30	Doctor	Single
(4)	Jake	Male	39	Accountant	Married
(5)	Peter	Male	36	Engineer	Married
(6)	Rico	Male	34	News reporter	Single
(7)	Paul	Male	32	Business Dev. Mgr	Married
(8)	Mark	Male	36	Business Dev. Mgr	Single
(9)	Andrew	Male	35	Theology student	Married
(10)	Winston	Male	35	Custom Officer	Married
(11)	Fiona	Female	36	Product Manager	Single
(12)	Ada	Female	29	Law student	Single
(13)	Danni	Female	34	Social worker	Married
(14)	Ann	Female	42	Matured student	Divorced
(15)	Renay	Female	35	Behavioural analyst	Married
(16)	Iris	Female	32	Cinema Manager	Single
(17)	Kate	Female	39	Boutique owner	Divorced
(18)	Lucy	Female	33	Music teacher	Married
(19)	May	Female	38	Service Officer	Married
(20)	Shirley	Female	34	Flight attendant	Married

Table 3.4: Demographic Information of Informants

3.5.2 Interviewing (Stage 3 to Stage 5)

"Perhaps the best way to gather the story is to have the individual tell about his or her experiences, through personal conversations or interviews" (Creswell 2005:486). Corresponding to Stage 3 of Hopkinson and Hogg's (2006) action stages in storied research, semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted in Hong Kong and lasted on average one hour. The interviews took place in a natural setting (e.g. home, office). "This enables the researcher to develop a level of detail about the individual or place and to be highly involved in the actual experiences of the participants" (Creswell 2003: 181). Two of the informants (Sam and Fiona) were revisited two years later in order to acquire additional information. The reason for revisiting these two informants was that both of them were in life transitions or at turning points (McAdams 1997) when the first interviews were held. I wanted to gain more insights into how the self had evolved, changed or developed in their narratives.

In line with Fournier's (1998) interview design, interviews were used to yield two types of information: (1) the informant's personal experience stories about their important possessions and (2) "contextual details concerning the informant's life world" (p. 347). Their personal experience stories often included turning points, significant episodes or memorable events in their lives (Angrosino 1989). One main question was used in the interviews based on reading the literature (e.g. Belk 1988, Richins 1994b and this guidance question was focused on possessions. As Taylor (1989) argues, "what I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me. To ask what I am in abstraction from self-interpretation makes no sense" (p. 34). The key question was "Tell me five stories about possessions that are important to you" because it is suggested that possessions are ideal objects through which people can express their

feelings, emotions and thoughts (Richins 1994a). In responding to Stage 4 of the action stages in storied research, supporting probes were used in order to provoke storytelling ("When did you get them?" "Tell me stories that explain the importance of the possessions to you" "How did you get them?").

The researcher started the semi-structured interviews with a set of introductory questions by asking about things that the informants were wearing or had in their possession (e.g. wallets, watches, keys, jackets) and that informants judged to be important to them at the time of the interviews. This opening question helped to stimulate the discussion. It is important to note that particular product categories were not the focal point of the interviews. Instead, it was the possessions (i.e. how individuals imbued products with meaning) rather than the product or brand categories themselves which were judged to be relevant for the stories about how consumption is used to mediate the self in relation to his or her own self (e.g. personal achievement, history), others (e.g. parents, romantic partners or friends) or in-groups (e.g. peer groups, religious groups or ethnic groups). Interviews were not strictly conducted and this was in line with Wagner and Wodak's (2006) method of narrative interviewing. Rather, the flow of topics varied depending on each individual's stories. "Questions may not follow on exactly in the way outlined on the schedule. Questions that are not included in the guide may be asked as the interviewer picks up on things said by interviewees" (Bryman 2001: 314). All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full and generated 203 pages of interview transcripts (Stage 5). In all, I collected 115 stories about informants' important possessions.

3.5.3 Data analysis (Stage 6)

Having collected informants' stories about their important possessions, as a narrative researcher, then moved on to the next level – data analysis. In this study, data analysis was undertaken in two stages and structured around firstly within-case analysis – restorying/retelling informants' stories (discussed in Chapter 4); and secondly cross-case analysis – yielding different themes from informants' stories (discussed in Chapter 5). Table 3.4 illustrates the iterative analytical process in this study. This study is an interpretive research project involving different stages of analysis and interpretation and following the general hermeneutic principle of interpreting stories (or empirical data) in a series of part-to-whole iterations (Thompson 1997, Spiggle 1994, Arnould and Fischer 1994). As Creswell (2007) notes, "it is inductive in form, going from the particular – the detailed data (e.g. transcriptions or types notes from interviews) – to the general – codes and themes" (p. 231). A final story line of informants' important possessions emerged through the iterative process of moving back and forth between emergent themes derived inductively from interview data and theories (Arnould and Epp 2006, Fournier and Mick 1999).

Within-case Analysis	Cross-case Analysis
Inductive – Identifying emergent themes in informants' stories	Inductive – identify patterns of emergent themes across 20 informants' stories
↕	↕
Deductive (1) – Using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three dimension structural analysis to reconstruct informants' stories in a chronological order	Deductive (2) – Using Brewer and Gardner's (1996) analytical framework of the trichotomization of the self to analyse how 20 informants form their trichotomization of the self
↕	
Deductive (2) – Using Brewer and Gardner's (1996) analytical framework of the trichotomization of the self to analyse how informants revealed their sense of self	↕ = This arrow indicates that the process was iterative "back and forthing" process for both within-case & cross-case analysis.

Figure 3.4: The Iterative Analytical Process in Within-case analysis and Cross-case Analysis in this Study

The first stage of analysis (within-case) involves restorying or retelling informants' stories in my own words. Restorying is one of the important steps in narrative research. As Creswell (2005) argues "restorying is the process in which the researcher gathers stories, analyzes them for key elements of the story (e.g. time, place, plot and scene), and then rewrites the story to place it in a chronological sequence. When individuals tell a story, this sequence is often missing or not logically developed" (p. 480).

In the within-case analysis, the transcripts were read a number of times in order to achieve familiarity with the material and to identify some emergent themes inductively; for example, personal history, achievements, interpersonal relationships with romantic, marital partners, family members and friends. The temporality is one of the key features in narratives (as discussed in Section 3.4.2.4). It is important for narrative researchers to gain insights into how informants reveal their sense of self in a temporal sequence in their stories. A three-dimensional narrative structural analysis (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) was applied deductively in order to examine how narrators told their stories under these three dimensions and to retell and reconstruct informants' stories in a chronological order. "The researcher often writes into the reconstituted story a chronology of events describing the individual's past, present and future experiences lodged within specific settings or contexts" (Creswell 2005: 477).

The three dimensions of narrative structural analysis are *interaction, continuity* and *situation* (See Table 3.5 for summary). The dimension of *interaction* is related to informants' belief, values and feeling on the personal level and interactions with other people on the social level (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The dimension of *continuity* is linked to how informants' past events or experiences lead to the present self and may influence informants' future decisions. It is "a consideration of the past that is

remembered, the present relating to experiences of an event, and the future, looking forward to possible experiences" (Creswell 2005: 482). The dimension of *situations* refers to the time and context where the stories had taken place (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Describing the setting or context for informants' experiences is the central phenomenon of narrative research. In the restorying of informants' stories, rich details about the setting or context of informants' experiences were included." (Creswell 2005: 483)

I analysed how informants told their stories about their important possessions that reflected on their selves. Brewer and Gardner's (1996) analytical framework of the self (the trichotomization of the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self) was used deductively in order to conceptualize how informants construct their sense of self through their possession stories.

Interaction		Continuity			Situation
Personal	*Social*	*Past*	*Present*	*Future*	*Place*
Internal: belief, attitudes, feelings, etc	**External:** Interactional setting, other people and their intentions and goals	**Backward:** Events and experiences in the early time	**Current:** How these experiences relate to the present time	**Forward:** How these experiences anticipate some developments in the future	Setting, Context, Time, Culture

Table 3.5: The Three Dimension Structural Analysis (Source: Creswell 2005: 483)

Having re-storied and analyzed individual informants' possession stories in within-case analysis, the data was re-examined inductively searching for emergent themes in the second stage of cross-case analysis (e.g. self-expression, achievement, strengthening relationships with romantic or marital partners, affirming relationships with family members and friends, memories of their past with a specific person(s), social status, etc). In line with interpretive research, narrative researchers may code informants' stories into themes or categories in order to seek patterns in meanings (Spiggle 1994). "The

identification of themes provides the complexity of a story and adds depth to the insight about understanding individual experiences... Narrative researchers typically present these themes after retelling story" (Creswell 2005: 482)

It is important to note this analytical process is iterative "back and forthing" (Clandinin and Connelly 2000: 138). As Creswell (2003) argues,

"The qualitative researcher uses complex reasoning that is multifaceted, iterative and simultaneous. Although the reasoning is largely inductive, both inductive and deductive processes are at work. The thinking process is also iterative, with a cycling back and forth from data collection and analysis to problem reformulation and back" (p. 183)

The initial findings from the empirical interview data steered the direction of subsequent literature reviews. "The literature was revisited in order to inform the interpretation and to subject the findings to theoretical scrutiny" (Lindridge and Hogg 2006: 986). Then, Brewer and Gardner's (1996) three-dimensional (the personal, relational and collective) analytical framework of the self was used deductively as a theoretical lens in order to examine and conceptualize how informants reflected on the dimensions of the personal, relational and collective self through their possession stories. It is common for narrative researchers to use a theoretical lens in developing their arguments. A theoretical lens serves as a guiding perspective that offers a structure for narrative researchers to examine informants' narratives (Creswell 2005, Miles and Huberman 1994). As Creswell (2003) argues

"Qualitative researchers increasingly use a theoretical lens or perspective to guide their study and raise the questions... they would like to address... They provide a lens (even a theory) to guide the researchers as to what issues are

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important to examine... They also indicate how the researcher positions himself or herself in the qualitative study (e.g. up front or biased from personal, cultural and historical contexts) and how the final written accounts need to be written" (p. 131).

3.5.3.1 Rethinking Validity and Reliability

Traditional research approaches which originated from the positivist paradigm tend to use scientific methods to generate statistical results in order to discover the world "out there". Traditional research approaches "...supported by the positivist or scientific paradigm, lead us to regard the world as made up of observable, measurable facts" (Glesne and Peshkin 1992: 6). Validity and reliability are two key concepts in these statistical scientific research methods, used to establish the soundness of the research design and trustworthiness (e.g. the generalisability of the significant findings). Kirk and Miller (1985) provide the definition of reliability and validity as "reliability is the extent to which a measurement produce yields the same answer however and whenever it is carried out; validity is the extent to which it gives the correct answer" (p. 19). Positivist researchers from the traditional research approaches often challenge how non-positivist researchers seek to establish the equivalent of validity and reliability in their studies.

However, Webster and Mertova (2007), Polkinghorne (1988) and Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that it is not appropriate to use criteria (i.e. the measures of validity and reliability) from traditional positivist approaches to explain narrative research and suggest rethinking validity and reliability in narrative research. In this section, I will discuss the issue of validity and reliability and suggest rethinking the connotations of validity and reliability used in narrative inquiry in interpretive research.

Narrative researchers are interested in understanding how individuals construct meanings in their lives and interpret their world from their lived experiences. Through storytelling, individuals reveal their sense of self via complex, intertwined and fragmented events. Social psychologist, Polkinghorne (1988), firstly begins by criticising positivist researchers who focus on the validity of statistical results arguing that the findings are correct and important without considering "the limited idea that the finding probably resulted from the chance drawing of sample elements from the population. In narrative research... a finding is significant if it is important" (p. 176). Narrative inquiry is not about "validity in representing something "out there" in the world, or even in expressing one's logically reasoned notions of how things "out there" ought to work" (Amsterdam and Bruner 2000: 13). In contrast, the validity of narrative is "more closely associated with meaningful analysis than with consequences" (Webster and Mertova 2007: 21). As Amsterdam and Bruner (2000) argue "stories derive their convincing power not from verifiability but from verisimilitude" (p 30).

Secondly, Polkinghorne (1988) argues that the concept of reliability in narrative inquiry is different from that used in quantitative research. While positivist researchers focus on the consistency and stability of the measuring instruments, narrative researchers pay attention to the trustworthiness of the transcriptions of interviews (Webster and Mertova 2007). Narrative researchers use transcriptions to generate rich and thick description[5] to convey the findings (Creswell 2003, Mile and Huberman 1994). Similarly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested four components for trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility refers to using "member checks" (p. 314) to validate the empirical data whereas transferability is related

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[5] "The term thick description was originally used by anthropologist Geertz (1973) and refers to interpretive analysis of the cultural meaning situated in people's interpretation of their experiences" (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993: 352).

to the possibility of applying a particular inquiry in another context or with other informants (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Dependability is linked to the issue of replicating a particular study and confirmability is related to safeguarding "the findings emerged from the context and the respondents and not solely from the researcher" (Wallendorf and Belk 1989: 69). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), "these (four components) are the constructionist equivalents of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity (p. 300).

However, Whittemore et al. (2001) criticised Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four components of validity in qualitative research that "resulted in the translation of terms (from positivist assumptions) [which are]... be more aligned with the interpretive perspective" (p.523). Lincoln and Guba (1985) failed to articulate how these components could be implemented in qualitative research, for example, "what does transferability and dependability mean to qualitative research? How can these criteria be assured? Who should confirm results: the participant, the investigator, or an outside expert?" (Whittemore et al. 2001: 523).

In addressing this problem, Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) analysed research papers in terms of how ethnographers in organisation studies convinced readers of the soundness of their research and to have confidence in the findings. They developed "three dimensions – authenticity, plausibility and criticality – central to the process of convincing" (p. 595) to demonstrate how qualitative researchers make the findings of their studies convincing to readers. These three dimensions guide interpretive researchers not only in organisation studies but increasingly in consumer research. As Hogg and Maclaran (2008) noted, these three rhetorical criteria in writing interpretivist consumer research help "consumer researchers working in the interpretivist tradition go about

composing well founded theorized storylines, in order to convince audiences of the soundness of the theory-building which emanates from their studies" (p. 130).

Authenticity refers to convincing the reader that the interpretation is drawn from and emerges out of the empirical data (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993). Informants' lived experiences and meanings are revealed in the interpretations. The researcher can achieve authenticity through revealing the processes of data collection and analysis thoroughly to the readers. In my study, the authenticity is attained through the detailed explanation of data collection, interviewing and two-stage data analysis (i.e. the within-case and cross-case analysis) using the frameworks of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Brewer and Gardner (1996) (as outlined in this section). In addition, the authenticity of the interpretations in my study is established through the iterative "back-and-forth" analytical process between the empirical data and literature. In this iterative process, the data was first examined inductively searching for emergent themes. Then the initial findings steered the direction of subsequent literature.

Plausibility is about "accounting for as much of the information as possible, so that there is some degree of well argued "fit" between the information (or data) and the explanation offered to account for the interpretation offered of the data" (Hogg and Maclaran 2008:137). In this study, the plausibility is achieved by identifying the research gaps of self and possession in existing literatures, (as outlined in section 2.8 of the literature review chapter), "thereby suggesting that to fill them in will offer something new in an area of generally shared importance" (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993: 609). In this study, plausibility was achieved by providing an overview of and a contextual background for the study and highlighting the research gaps of self and possessions, particularly in relation to the calls for research to examine the coexistence of the trichotomization of the

self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) and to study the meaning of possessions in non-western empirical contexts (outlined in the literature review chapter, Chapter 2).

Criticality is related to readers' reflexivity. Interpretivist researchers provoke the criticality of the readers and use critical reflection to "provide opportunities for readers to take time out in order to reflect on the ideas and thoughts disclosed in reading the text" (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993: 610). In my study, it is hoped that the research gaps in the literature review chapter (Chapter 2), the findings from the within-case analysis (Chapter 4) and cross-case analysis (Chapter 5) and the discussion chapter (Chapter 6) will provoke readers to re-examine and reflect on their currently views on issues revolving around self and possessions, and encourage readers to envisage other possibilities to examine the issues of self and possessions in consumer research.

3.6 Conclusion

In this Chapter, I discussed four levels that underpin my study: ontological and epistemological position, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods using Crotty's (2003) research framework scaffolding approach. My ontological and epistemological position (Section 3.2) is social constructionism and I seek to understand how people construct and interpret their world and experiences as they engage in it (Crotty 2003, Easterby-Smith et al. 2008, Creswell 2007, Burr 2003). My theoretical perspective (Section 3.3) is symbolic interactionism, one of the forms of interpretivism that focuses on people's interpretation of meanings in the social world through the use of shared symbols in communication and people's construction of the self in the process of social interaction (Blumer 1969, Burr 2003, Bryman 2001).

My methodology, narrative inquiry research design (Section 3.4), is one of the interpretivist approaches that provides a rich framework that researchers can use to

investigate the way "humans experience the world depicted through their stories" (Webster and Mertova 2007: 1). Narratives provide a sense of self-continuity for informants when storytelling about important possessions. Informants revealed their sense of self in relation to their own individualistic self, their relationships with close others and groups. The detailed explanations of data collection, interviewing and data analysis were provided in Section 3.5.

The next chapter (Chapter 4 – within-case analysis) will provide ten informants' idiographic narratives of their important possessions. Before analysing each informant's narrative, I will first introduce a rudimentary framework of self-configuration around the trichotomization of the self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) (Section 4.2.1) and the phenomenon of the *extended possessions* within the self-possession boundary that has emerged from my analysis of the empirical data to the readers (Section 4.2.2) at the beginning of the next chapter. A table summary of possession meanings and patterns of self-configuration around the trichotomization of the self will be presented at the end of the chapter (Chapter 4, Table 4.14).

Chapter 4: Within-Case Analysis: 10 Informants' Narratives

4.1 Introduction

Analysis in this thesis was undertaken in two stages and structured around firstly within-case analysis (Chapter 4); and secondly cross-case analysis (see Chapter 5). I first "looked within transcripts to understand" each informant's possession stories (Chapter 4). Then I "look across transcripts to compare" informants' stories and to "develop thematic understanding that accounted for all of the data" (Chapter 5) (Epp and Price 2009: 4). This chapter focuses on the within-case analysis involving an iterative process of inductive and deductive approaches to the analysis of my empirical data (see Section 3.5.3 in Chapter 3 Methodology for details discussion).

In this chapter, I will present idiographic analysis of narratives from ten informants **(Informant 1 – 10)**. The rationale for choosing these ten informants' stories in this chapter is because they "... are chosen for their ability to point to plausible theoretical insights, through either major themes or, in a few instances, their distinctiveness" (Fournier and Mick 1999: 8) which relate to possession meanings and self-configurations. The other ten informants' narratives **(Informant 11 – 20)** will be presented in Appendix II. It should be noted that I took account of all twenty informants' narratives when doing my analysis, interpretation and theory building.

Each informant's narratives was first read a number of times in order to gain a broad understanding of the data by identifying some emergent themes inductively, for example, personal achievement, enhancing relationships with close others and social status. Then, Brewer and Gardner's (1996) analytical framework of the trichotomization

of the self (the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self) was used in the second stage deductively in order to examine and conceptualize how informants make sense of themselves reflecting the trichotomization of the self through their possession stories. These possessions are "... linked in memory to key episodes in one's life, which in turn are strung together to form a story. This story line allows people to make sense of who they are and provides a connected identity from past, to present and into possible imagined futures" (Ahuvia 2005: 172).

In the style of Thompson and Troester (2002) and Epp and Price (2009), I am presenting a preview of the conceptual framework of self-configuration based on the trichotomization of the self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) (Section 4.2.1) at the beginning of the chapter. I also present another preview of the concept of *extended possessions* within the self-possession boundary (Section 4.2.2.) that has emerged from my analysis of the empirical data for the readers. Then, I move on to present the findings from my idiographic analysis of ten informants' (five men's and five women's) narratives in Section 4.3.

4.2. Conceptual Framework based on the Findings

4.2.1 Self-configuration based on the Trichotomization of the Self

Drawing on the iterative analytical process, the meaning of possessions and the pattern of self-configuration from each informant around the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self (the trichotomization of the self) (Brewer and Gardner 1996) were elicited. Figure 4.1 summarizes five patterns of self-configurations that emerged from the empirical data. They are: the complete relational self-configuration (Element 4.1.1), the relationally-led self-configuration (Element 4.1.2), the personal-relational

equilibrium self-configuration (Element 4.1.3), the personally-led self-configuration (Element 4.1.4) and the personal-relational-collective self-configuration (Element 4.1.5).

First, the complete relational self-configuration (Figure 4.1, Element 4.1.1) refers to those informants all of whose possession stories are all related to the relational dimension of the self and none of whose stories are linked to the personal and collective dimensions of the self. Second, the relationally-led self-configuration (Figure 4.1, Element 4.1.2) refers to informants who offered possession stories that are more closely linked to their relational dimension of the self than to the personal dimension of the self and none of their stories are linked to the collective dimension of the self. Third, the personal-relational equilibrium self-configuration (Figure 4.1, Element 4.1.3) suggests that informants placed approximately equal weight on the personal-relational meanings of their possessions.

Fourth, the personally-led self-configuration (Figure 4.1, Element 4.1.4) is illustrated by possession stories that are largely linked to informants' personal dimension of the self rather than to the relational dimension of the self, and no story is connected to the collective dimension of the self. Finally, the personal-relational-collective self-configuration (Figure 4.1, Element 4.1.5) indicates that informants narrated stories about their important possessions that were linked to the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self. Five patterns of self-configurations will be discussed in details in Chapter 6 (Section 6.2).

Figure 4.1 shows that none of the informants emphasized the collective dimension of the self in their stories. Thus, a pattern of collective-led self-configuration is absent

from the empirical findings reported here. The absence of the collective emphasis in the

findings will be discussed in Section 6.5 in the discussion chapter (Chapter 6).
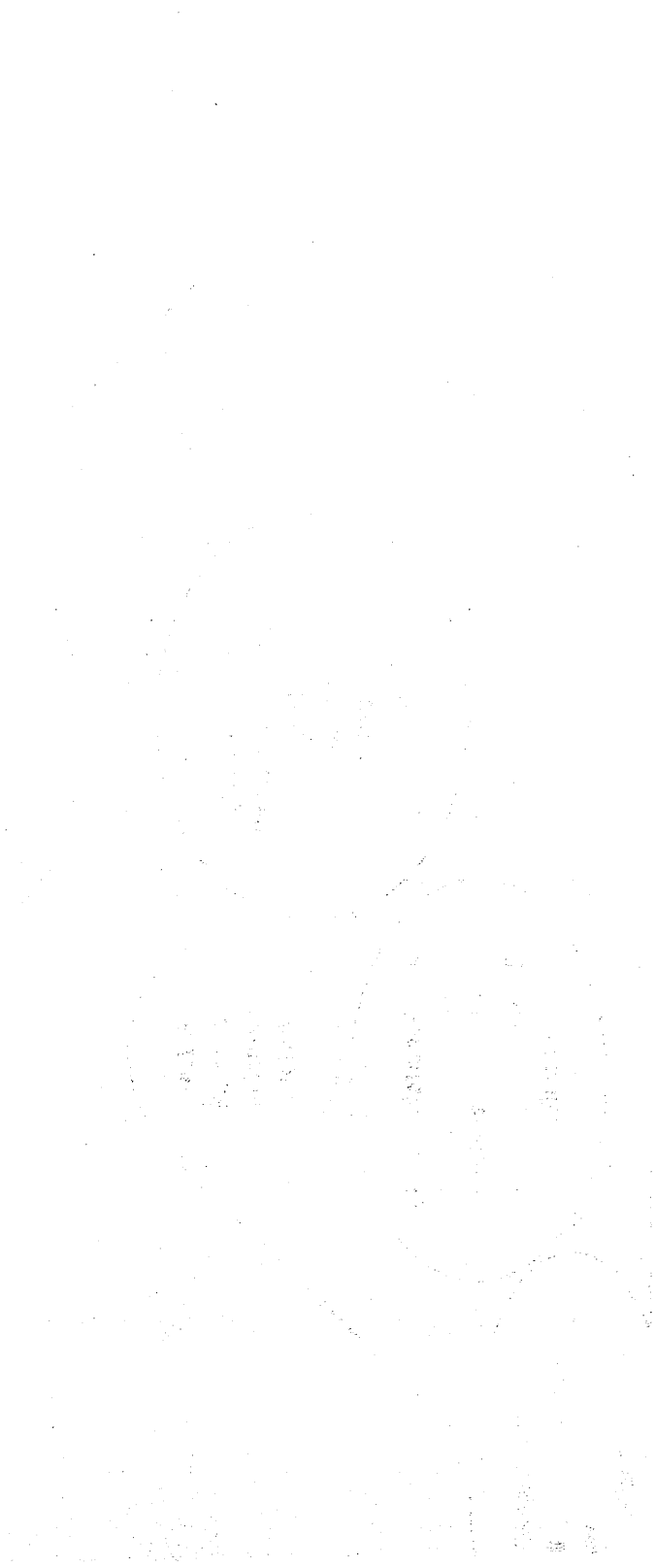
Personal
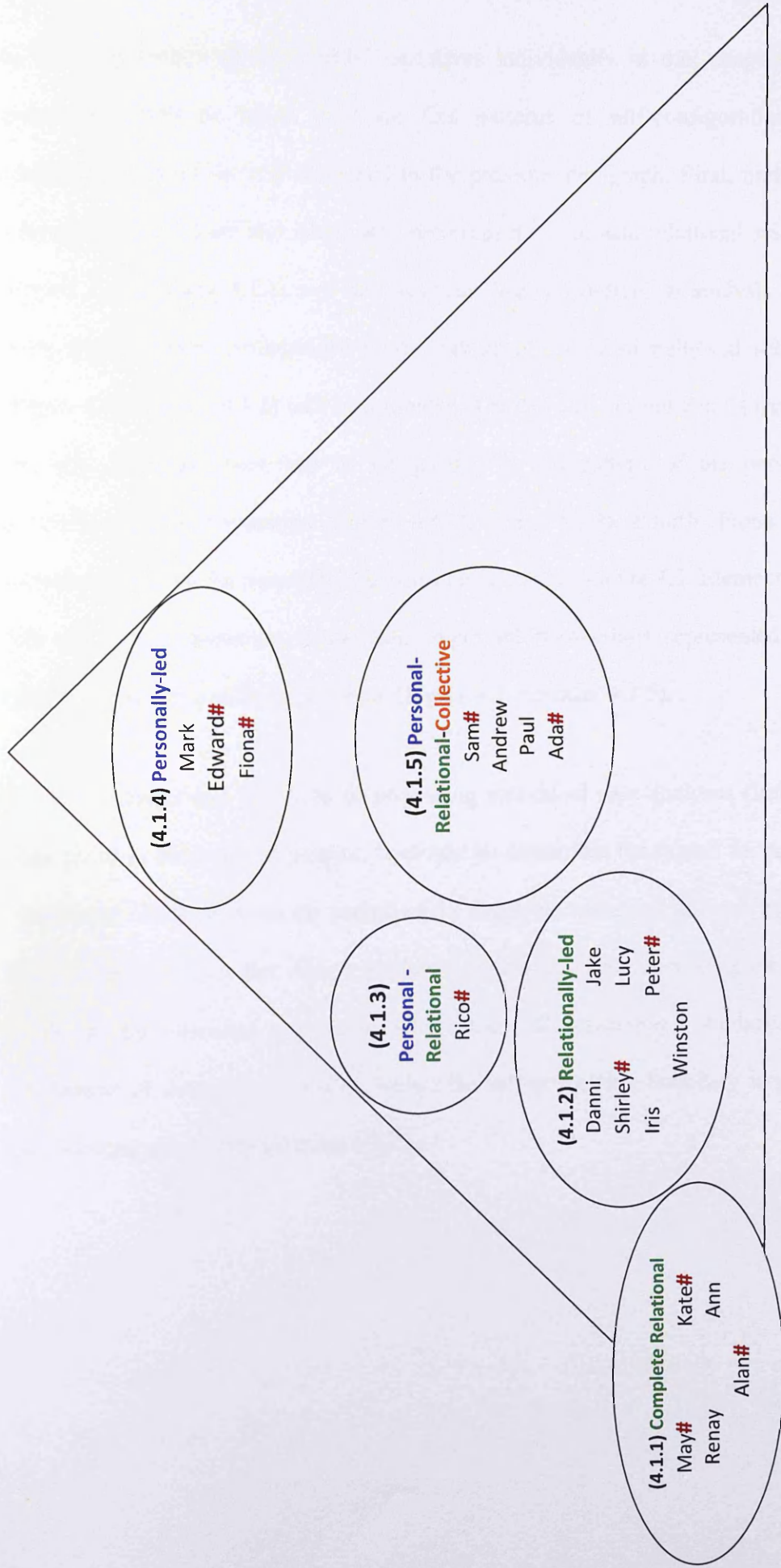
Collective

Relational

(4.1.4) Personally-led
Mark
Edward#
Fiona#

(4.1.5) Personal-
Relational-Collective
Sam#
Andrew
Paul
Ada#

(4.1.3)
Personal -
Relational
Rico#

(4.1.2) Relationally-led
Danni   Jake
Shirley# Lucy
Iris   Peter#
Winston

(4.1.1) Complete Relational
May#   Kate#
Renay   Ann
Alan#

Figure 4.1: Patterns of Informants' Self-Configuration in the Light of the Trichotomization of the Self

Note: Narratives of Informants with a sharp symbol (#) will be presented in this chapter. The absence of collectively –led self-configuration will be discussed in Chapter 6 (Section 6.5).

In terms of presenting informants' narratives individually in this chapter, the order of presentation will be based on these five patterns of self-configurations around the trichotomization of the self discussed in the previous paragraph. First, narratives of three informants (May, Kate and Alan) who represent the complete relational self-configuration (Figure 4.1, Element 4.1.1) will be presented. Second, individual analysis of Shirley and Peter whose stories corresponded to the pattern of the relationally-led self-configuration (Figure 4.1, Element 4.1.2) will be presented. Third, I will present Rico's narrative, as he is the only informant who will be categorised in the pattern of the personal-relational equilibrium self-configuration (Figure 4.1, Element 4.1.3). Fourth, Fiona and Edward's narratives illustrate the personally-led self-configuration (Figure 4.1, Element 4.1.4). Finally, Ada and Sam's narratives about their important possessions represented the personal-relational-collective self-configuration (Figure 4.1, Element 4.1.5).

Table 4.1 summarizes the order of presenting individual case analyses (Informant 1 – 10 highlighted in blue) in this chapter. It should be noted that the reason for presenting three informants' narratives from the pattern of the complete relational self-configuration (Figure 4.1, Element 4.1.1.) is that Alan's narratives represent a prominent case that illustrates the notion of the *extended possession* within the self-possession boundary. The detailed explanation of *extended possession* within the self-possession boundary is given below in the following paragraphs (Section 4.2.2.).

Name	Patterns of Self-Configuration
1) Alan	The complete relational self-configuration
2) Kate	The complete relational self-configuration
3) May	The complete relational self-configuration
4) Peter	The relationally-led self-configuration
5) Shirley	The relationally-led self-configuration
6) Rico	The personal-relational equilibrium self-configuration
7) Fiona	The personally-led self-configuration
8) Edward	The personally-led self-configuration
9) Ada	The personal-relational-collective self-configuration
10) Sam	The personal-relational-collective self-configuration
11) Ann	The complete Relational self-configuration
12) Renay	The complete Relational self-configuration
13) Lucy	The Relationally-led self-configuration
14) Jake	The Relationally-led self-configuration
15) Danni	The Relationally-led self-configuration
16) Winston	The Relationally-led self-configuration
17) Iris	The Relationally-led self-configuration
18) Mark	The Personally-led self-configuration
19) Paul	The Personal-Relational-Collective self-configuration
20) Andrew	The Personal-Relational-Collective self-configuration

Table 4.1: Patterns of Informants' Self-Configuration: Order of Presenting Individual Analysis

Note: Narratives of Informants 1 – 10 (highlighted in blue) will be presented in this chapter and Informants 11 – 20 will be presented in Appendix.

4.2.2 Self-Possession Boundary

Having outlined the preview of the conceptual framework of self-configuration in the previous section (Section 4.2.1), I now present another preview of the concept of *extended possessions* within the self-possession boundary in this section before moving on to present my idiographic analysis of ten informants' narratives in the next section (Section 4.3). In order to clarify the terms self-possession boundary which I use extensively throughout my thesis, I pause briefly here to define the term drawing on my empirical data.

How individuals construct their sense of self through possessions has been a central concern of consumer research since Belk's (1988) seminal paper more than twenty years ago. Belk (1988) discussed the use of possessions for defining and extending the self (i.e. possessions as self-extensions). In addition, Belk (1984) suggested that consumers from various social

and cultural backgrounds tend to have different interpretations about the psychological ownership of possessions that reveal their sense of self (Pierce et al. 2003).

The self-possession boundary is defined in this thesis as delineating the relationship between an individual's sense of self and their possessions. Various studies showed that individuals not only regard objects they own as part of their possessions, they also "develop feeling of ownership for a variety of objects, material and immaterial" (Pierce et al. 2003: 84). In other words, individuals extend their sense of self through possessions (Belk 1988) even beyond their physical and legal boundaries (Belk 1988, 2007, Rudmin 1990, 1994, Pierce et al. 2001, 2003).

The empirical data of this study showed that informants regarded self-gifts, gift-receipts, gift-giving and other material (e.g. photos or songs) as important possessions which formed their self-possession boundaries. While most of the informants' possession stories in this study are in line with Belk's western-based definition of self-possession boundary, some of informants' possession stories did not fit neatly into any western-based description (e.g. informants considered gifts that they had *given* to close others as still remaining as part of their own important possessions). This is what is termed and identified as informants' *"extended possessions"* in this study (Wong and Hogg 2010). The notion of *"extended possessions"* within the self-possession boundary will be discussed in greater detail in Section 6.4 in Chapter 6.

Table 4.2 summarizes the sources of possessions that informants acquired and indicates the order of presenting individuals' narratives (Informant 1 – 10 highlighted in blue) in Chapter 4. An asterisk (*) is used to mark informants who had possession stories that are related to

gifts that they had *given* to their close others but which they continue to count as part of their own selves (i.e. an *extended possession* within self-possession boundary).

To summarize this section, this study focuses on two main areas: (1) investigating and conceptualizing each informant's pattern of self-configuration in terms of the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self (the trichotomization of the self) and (2) examining informants' self-possession boundary via their stories about important possessions. The within-case analysis in Section 4.3 will be presented under these two lines of arguments.

In Section 4.3, I will present idiographic analysis of ten informants' narratives in order to provide a holistic account of how they each formed their sense of self and possession meanings. At the end of Chapter 4 (Section 4.4), I will conclude this chapter with a summary table (Table 4.14) to highlight possession themes and each informant's pattern of self-configuration in terms of the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self.

Table 4.2: Self-Possession Boundary: Summary of Sources of Informants' Possessions

Name & Patterns of Self-Configuration	Sources of Informants' Important Possessions			
	Self-gift	Gift-receiving	Gift-giving[6]	Other Objects[7]
1) Alan* The complete Relational self-configuration	-	1) A PhD watch from Yuan	2) A watch for Yuan 3) A stuffed toy rabbit for Yuan 4) A diamond necklace for Yuan 5) A musical box for Yuan	6) A pair of watches between Alan and Yuan
2) Kate The complete Relational self-configuration	-	1) A vintage watch from John 2) A "Big mouth" watch from John 3) A Titus watch from John 4) A Rolex from John 5) An Albert watch from her father	-	6) Some photos with her father
3) May * The complete Relational self-configuration	-	1)) A Seiko watch from Roy 2) A Rolex from Roy 3) A "Forever Friend" watch from her friend	4) A "Forever Friend" watch for her friend 5) A Titus "everlasting love" watch for her friend	6) A wedding album 7) Some small gold ornaments that belong to her son
4) Peter * The Relationally-led self-configuration	1) Swatch collection 2) Galaxy watch 3) Casio watches	4) Swatch	5) A Swatch watch for Danni	6) A blanket 7) A sweater 8) A film 9) A Rolex watch
5) Shirley*	1) A Titus watch	2) An engagement ring	5) A Rolex for her mother	6) Swatch watches

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[6] Gift-giving: Informants bought gifts for their significant others. Although these gifts do not belong to informants, they still consider them as their important possessions and I denoted this as extended possessions within the self-possession boundary.

[7] Other Objects: Informants acquired possessions through other ways. Or informants did not specify where they had acquired possessions in the interviews.

The Relationally-led self-configuration		from Jake		
		3) A diamond pendant from Jake		
		4) A birthday watch from her sister		
6)) Rico **The Personal-Relational equilibrium self-configuration**	1) A Seiko watch	3) A "limited edition teeth-marked" watch from his deceased uncle	-	5) A writing mat
	2) A Senate watch	4) A watch from his mother		6) A singing contest video tape
				7) A photo
7) Fiona **The Personally-led self-configuration**	1) A Christian Dior watch	3) A Seiko watch from Nick	-	-
	2) A Rolex watch	4) Corum and Vivienne Westwood watches from Jason		
8) Edward **The Personally-led self-configuration**	1) Cars that he no longer has	-	-	2) Two cassette tapes
				3) ACM CDs
				4) Musical instruments
				5) His wedding ring
9) Ada **The Personal-Relational-Collective self-configuration**	1) A Rolex watch	2) A Notting Hill watch from Sam	-	3) Her school magazine
				4) Songs she listened to when she was at Harvard
				5) A film
10) Sam * **The Personal-Relational-Collective self-configuration**	1) His first BMW that Sam no longer has	4) An Agnes B watch from Ada	5) An engagement ring for Ada	6) His stethoscope that Sam no longer has
	2) His Dunhill pen			
	3) His second BMW			
11) Ann*	1) A scuba diving	-	2) A wedding gift of a watch	-

The complete **Relational** **self-configuration**	watch		for her ex-husband 3) A gift of a watch for her ex-boyfriend 4) A gift of a watch for her current boyfriend 5) A gift of a watch for her mother	
12) Renay **The complete** **Relational** **self-configuration**	-	1) Engagement watches 2) A "moon and the sun" watch from her husband 3) A Mickey Mouse watch from her father 4) A "good day starts in the morning" watch from her father		5) Her father's horse jade
13) Lucy * **The** **Relationally-led** **self-configuration**	-	1) A piano from her cousin	2) A gift of a scuba diving watch for Winston	3) Engagement rings 4) The lover set of Titus watches
14) Jake * **The** **Relationally-led** **self-configuration**	1) A Swatch watch	2) Oris watch from his church friends	3) A Rolex watch for his father 4) A Swatch watch for Shirley 5) A diamond cross pendant for Shirley 6) An engagement ring for Shirley	-
15) Danni * **The** **Relationally-led** **self-**	1) Two Swatch watches	-	2) A Seiko watch for her father	3) A family portrait without her 4) A graduation photo with her

configuration				father's smile 5) A lover set of watches
16) Winston * **The** Relationally-led **self-configuration**	-	1) A gift of a Casio watch on his wedding day from his wife 2) A gift of a birthday watch from his wife	3) A teddy bear for Lucy	4) Toys from his childhood 5) A lover set of "everlasting love" watches
17) Iris * **The** Relationally-led **self-configuration**	1) Her Citizen watch 2) An Agfa watch	3) A gift of a pocket watch from her uncle 4) A gift of a red scarf from her ex-boyfriend	5) Some Disneyland gifts for her cousin	-
18) Mark * **The Personally-led self-configuration**	1) Timex Ironman 2) White Ironman 3) Polar heart rate monitor	-	4) A Rolex watch for his ex-girlfriend	5) Old training shirts
19) Paul * **The Personal-** Relational-Collective **self-configuration**	1) Faye Wong CDs 2) A red Guess jumper 3) A Swatch watch 4) A green Roots jumper 5) A Ball watch	-	6) A Casio watch for Lily	7) His wedding ring 8) Polar heart rate monitor
20) Andrew **The Personal-** Relational-Collective **self-configuration**	1) A "Time is money" watch 2) His first house that he no longer has 3) Swatch watches	4) A gift of a watch from his wife 5) A licence plate form his father 6) A gift of a watch from his father	-	-

Note: Narratives of Informant 1 – 10 (highlighted in blue) will be presented in this chapter and Informant 11 – 20 will be presented in Appendix.

* = Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their own possessions in some of their possession stories.

4.3 The Order of Presentation within Each Informant's Narratives

This section presents 10 informants' narratives of their important possessions revealing their dimensions of the self. According to Thompson (1997), it is important to first understand informants' life narratives that contain "a complex background of historically established cultural meanings and belief systems" in order to understand how informants "personalized meanings and conceptions of self-identity are constructed" (p.440). Each individual case-analysis consists of (1) an informant's life narrative and (2) analysis.

1) Informant's Life Narrative

As in the style of Ahuvia's study of "loved objects and consumers' identity narratives" (2005: 171), I will begin with each informant's case by introducing his/ her life narrative which indicates key aspects of his/ her life in terms of his/ her background and characteristics (e.g. belief and values) before presenting my within-case analysis. Then I will present my analysis of each informant's idiosyncratic narratives in the next section revealing emergent possession meanings and each informant's self-configuration in terms of the trichotomization of the self. Each informant's story line reveals his or her self-developmental process in narratives about consumption and possessions. The self-development process is manifested in two ways: in terms of "*stability* (i.e. the historical development of a person's sense of self-identity) and in terms of *change* (i.e. a person's ability to redefine his or her history and to incorporate new identity elements into his or her life and self-concept)" (Thompson 1997: 447

2) Analysis of Each Informant's Narratives

The within-case analysis of each informant is divided into three parts: the introduction, the main body of analysis and the summary. In the introduction, I provide a brief introduction

with a table of possession meanings and the trichotomization of the self in order to provide a structure (or a framework) for presenting the analysis of each informant's narratives.

In the main body of analysis, I analysed each informant's narratives and linked them clearly to relevant dimensions of the self and the associated possession meanings that these narratives belong to. At the end of the analysis, I will offer a summary using Markus & Kitayama's conceptual representation of the interdependent view of self (see Figure 4.2) as a visual illustration to map out how each informant constructed their self-configuration in terms of the three dimensions of the self in their storytelling about important possessions. Table 4.3 summarizes the structure of presentation and analysis within each informant's narratives.
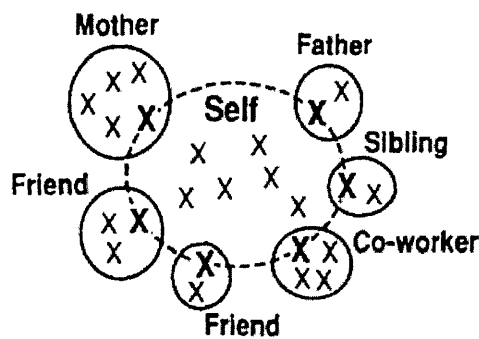
Figure 4.2: Conceptual Representation of the Interdependent View of Self (Source: Markus and Kitayama 1991: 226)

Order of Presentation Within Each Informant's Narratives	Description
1) Informant's Life Narrative	To indicate key aspects of his/ her life in terms of his/ her background and characteristics (e.g. belief and values)
2) Analysis	To demonstrate analysis of an informant's narratives revealing different dimensions of the self (the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self) and possession meanings linking to his/ her self-configuration

Table 4.3: The Order of Presentation Within Each Informant's Narratives

4.3.1 Alan

4.3.1.1 Alan's Life Narrative

Alan is a 35-year old lecturer who moved to the UK two years ago. Both Alan's parents passed away when he was a child and he was brought up by his grandmother. As he was the only child in the family, he was *"locked up"* most of the time at home by his grandmother and did not have the chance to play with children from next door. As a result, Alan had limited chances to learn how to establish interpersonal relationships and to socialize with other children. His insecurity came from the lack of unconditional parental love and interpersonal communication. Alan still feels uneasy about establishing any interpersonal relationship, i.e. friendship with people or colleagues at work.

> *Alan: "Of course, I had lots of friends in (primary) school. But outside school time, I couldn't go out. I didn't have a chance to play outside. But I would find a way to enjoy myself at home... watching sunset from the balcony".*

Because of his lonely childhood and poor interpersonal communication, he distanced himself from the others and tried to be emotionless, *"cold-blooded"* and *"not friendly"*.

Meeting the love of his life, Yuan, his wife was a major turning point in his life (McAdams 1985, McAdams 1997, Andersen 1993, Andersen et al. 2002). They met at a university welcome camp. Through Yuan, Alan finally found his emotional stability and security in his life. Soon after Yuan became the focal point of his universe, providing unconditional love and support. In addition, Yuan has taught Alan how to care about others in order to build up better interpersonal relationships with others. Alan has two contrasting self-descriptions of his two identities, *"a cold-blooded person"* as a boss at work and *"a sensitive man"* as a husband for Yuan.

Alan: "My wife has taught me a lot... taught me how to deal with [communicate] people. I learned a little bit more. Before that, I just didn't know how to deal with people. People in the past said that I was not friendly."

Alan: "I don't think I am a sensitive man. I was a cold-blooded person when I was at work. I am only a sensitive man when I am with my wife. Only to my wife... I think I have more sensitive towards her. It is my character. That's how I think and that's what people said about me. I used to fire people without a blink. And I don't think about the consequence."

Due to his lonely childhood, Alan is motivated to avoid the past undesired self (lonely and insecure) that he did not want to be associated with (Ogilvie 1987). In contrast, he approached his desired self of being loved, and having a stable and secure life through his relationship with his beloved wife. However, at the back of Alan's mind, he continues to have a great fear of losing Yuan one day (his feared self) as he lost his parents when he was little. His fear of losing Yuan is closely connected to his insecure self.

Alan: *"Too fast (knowing her for 16 years). Still like yesterday. I didn't think that way in the past. But, now I think time is going too fast. Age-wise... is not scary. But having been together for such a long time... I got a feeling that we might be apart."*

Interviewer: *"What do you mean?"*

Alan: *"Till death do us apart."*

Interviewer: *"Are you scared?"*

Alan: *"I am not scared but I am not willing to be apart. Don't want to let her go."*

Due to his insecurity when he was a child, he strived for security through his own effort by studying hard, getting a degree, finding a well-paid job and purchasing his first house at an early age. Growing up in a council housing estate in Hong Kong, he was motivated to study and achieved good grades in GCSE and A-level. After completing his undergraduate degree, he beat one thousand applicants to get a civil service job (EO). He was successful and earned enough money to provide him with security in terms of financial stability so that he was able

to buy his first house after his first year of employment. Pursuing his MBA while he was working as an IT consultant made him realize that his passion was for academic research. He decided to give up his job, pursued a PhD and has found a job as a lecturer in the UK.

> Alan: "I was very down at that time [while I was working at the bank]... had no mood to talk... lost my interest in everything. That's why [I quit to pursue my study in PhD]. I have never earned so little (money) while I was working on my PhD. It was quite difficult to adjust. But the reason why I wanted to do a PhD is... money is not the most important thing. Your interest is the most important things. You want to find something that lasts for a life time."

4.3.1.2 Analysis of Alan's Stories about His Important Possessions: the Complete Relational Self-Configuration

Unlike other informants who have possession stories that reflect different identities on different dimensions of the self, the things Alan regarded as important possessions are all linked to the relational dimension of the self, reflecting only one identity – a caring husband for his wife, Yuan. There is no story relating to his personal and collective dimensions of the self. As a result, his pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the complete relational emphasis. As Table 4.4 shows, all of his important possessions serve the purpose of "enhancing, strengthening and cultivating" his relationships with Yuan.

In terms of his self-possession boundary, Alan regarded the gifts that he had bought for and given to his wife as among his own important possessions. Apart from watches that they exchanged when they first met at a university orientation camp (his first possession story) and the PhD watch that he received as a gift from his wife (his fifth possession story), all of his possessions in his narratives are gifts that he has given to his wife. In other words, these possessions in fact belong to his wife. Although Alan does not own these possessions, he still regards these objects as his important possessions (i.e. psychological ownership). This suggests that Alan might have a broader view of what constitute his sense of self and self-

possession boundaries. His narratives revolve around his love story with Yuan from the dating stage to the marital stage.

In addition, Alan's themes of his life story through his important possessions revolved around his past self as an insecure, unloved and lonely child and his present self as a secured, loved and sensitive man on the axis of self-change and self-continuity. That is, he moved from the unwanted past self to the desired and contented present self and projects a possible future self.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Alan's important possessions
Personal Self	-	-
Relational Self	Enhancing, strengthening and cultivating relationship with Yuan	1) A pair of watches
		2) A gift of a watch for Yuan
		3) A gift of a stuffed toy rabbit for Yuan
		4) A gift of a diamond necklace for Yuan
		5) A musical box as a gift for Yuan
		6) A PhD watch as a gift received from Yuan
	Memories of the past with Yuan	1) A pair of watches
		2) A gift of a watch for Yuan
		3) A gift of a stuffed toy rabbit for Yuan
		4) A gift of a diamond necklace for Yuan
		5) A musical box as a gift for Yuan
		6) A PhD watch as a gift received from Yuan
Collective Self	-	-

Table 4.4: Alan's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Alan began his first story about a pair of watches by situating his narrative against the background of a university orientation camp and described how he had first met Yuan. The pair of watches is the most memorable possession for Alan and is the testimony to mark the beginning of their love story. People sometimes have similar descriptions of their "love" of things and their "love" of their romantic partner (Ahuvia 1993). Falling in love with one item has a strong link to falling in love in the person who is associated with the item. Caring about Yuan's broken watch and showing an interest in fixing the watch for her symbolized Alan's interest and desire to get to know her.

Alan: "It was the time we just met at the orientation camp. She had that watch on her wrist and I had mine. There was a water leak in her watch... moulded... can't see the time. I just met her at that time. I took her watch and she took mine. This lasted for about one and a half months. It was an excuse for me so that I could keep contact with her."

Alan continued his second love story about a special gift of a watch that he bought for Yuan at the beginning of their dating stage in order to achieve a relational effect of displaying love and affection (Ruth et al. 1999). Because of his insecure feelings especially feeling unloved in the past, he wanted to be accepted and loved by Yuan. Alan tried very hard to cultivate and secure the relationship hoping it would blossom and he spent time on and energy pleasing Yuan. The watch was not a spontaneous gift. In contrast, Alan invested a lot of time thinking about what to buy and where to give the special gift (Sherry 1983). As Pierce et al.'s (2003) suggested one of the factors whereby individuals develop ownership feelings towards an object is through investing themselves (e.g. their time, money or effort) into the object.

Alan: "The next one is the one I bought for her as a birthday present... in the first year of our date. I bought a new one for her because the previous one is broken. It's like an extension of the previous one. She can't just wear my watch all the time... coz it is a man's watch. The watch I bought engraved her name on it. The design of the watch is very interesting and funny. There is a cover and a ring on the front case. You press a button than the ring will turn and turn. When you open the cover, you can see her name. Very cool."

As their relationship developed, Alan continuously tried his best to keep their relationship alive and cultivated a stable relationship with Yuan. He has become more approachable to other people and less lonely because he is in love. His love towards Yuan has grown as well as the number of gifts that he has bought for her. Alan had never asked Yuan to reciprocate any presents (Belk and Coon 1993). It is the agapic love that Alan is willing to sacrifice his time and money to buy something to surprise Yuan. When Yuan accepted his presents, he felt secure and accepted in the relationship. Yuan has become more important and occupies an increasingly significant position in Alan's self-definition.

As their relationship developed, Alan and Yuan started sharing similar interests in their consumption. Alan told his third story about a stuffed toy rabbit as one of his important possessions that marked a different stage in their relationship. This stuffed toy rabbit was a surprise gift that Alan bought for Yuan. From the time that Yuan received the stuffed toy rabbit onwards, they developed a new interest together as a couple in collecting different rabbit figures. It is their "consumption style" (Holt 1997, Holt 1998) of how they consumed, experienced and collected all rabbit figures that built and shaped their identities as a couple. When they moved to the UK, they left quite a lot of things behind. However, they brought the stuffed toy rabbit with them. The stuffed toy rabbit is part of them (Belk 1988) that Alan would not easily throw away.

The stuffed toy rabbit marked their history together as a dating couple in the past and has witnessed their loving relationship grow as a married couple. Alan projected his love towards Yuan onto the stuffed toy rabbit (Belk 1988). He mended the stuffed toy rabbit, washed it and put it into a transparent plastic bag to try to keep it *"as long as he could"*. Over time, the meanings of the stuffed toy rabbit have become idiosyncratic, singular and irreplaceable and intertwined layers of meanings as the rabbit gradually took on "patina" (McCracken 1990). Alan's sense of ownership of this gift developed – "a lived relationship with the object" (Pierce et al. 2003: 93).

The stuffed toy rabbit not only marked their romantic history from the past, i.e. the past affiliated relational self, but also represents the present moment of their shared attachment towards rabbit figure collection, i.e. the present affiliated relational self. It also symbolizes their promising future together, i.e. the future affiliated relational self (Schultz et al. 1989). This story of how Alan tried to mend the worn-out gift (a stuffed toy rabbit), wrapped it in a

plastic bag and displayed it in their bedroom follows Olsen's (1985) suggestion that younger

married couples build up their history together through their possessions.

> Alan: "There is a soft toy rabbit dressed in a farmer outfit... this big. We were just
> dating for few months. One day we saw this rabbit [stuffed toy] at Shatin railway
> shopping mall. She loved it so much... touching it... hugging it. But she thought it was
> too expensive. Then she didn't buy it. We left coz we were on the way to the uni. I
> went back to the shop afterwards. When she got it, she was really surprised and
> happy. She really likes this rabbit. After this rabbit, she developed a special liking
> towards rabbits. We still have it. My wife wanted to throw it away but I insisted not to.
> It is kind of worn-out. I amended it. Now we put it in a transparent plastic bag after
> washing it. It is in our bedroom. I hope I can keep it as long as I could. I really don't
> want to throw it away."

Alan narrated his fourth story about a gift of a necklace to Yuan. Yuan is Alan's rock and

source of security and love. Underneath his insecurity, Alan wanted to show his affections to

her through various gifts to secure his love. He wants to be a loving husband to Yuan and

always looks for something to buy for her to please her, i.e. to secure and cultivate their

relationship. The necklace is a meaningful gift for Alan because it symbolises a continuous

on-going love, "a heart-to-heart diamond" necklace to Yuan and strengthens their

relationship. This special gift has connected Alan and Yuan to a more stable relationship.

> Alan: "I can't remember what occasion I bought... I just remember an advertisement
> of a heart-to-heart diamond series. I found it very beautiful. I secretly bought it for
> her. She was really surprised when she got it. The most surprising part is that there
> was a diamond ring hanging there on the necklace. She can wear it as a ring or
> combine it as a pendant. It is really funny. I think I bought it from Tse Tsui Lun. When
> she got it, she was very puzzled coz she wasn't sure whether I was proposing to her or
> not. But it wasn't the plan. I just wanted to buy her something."

In his narratives about his fifth important possession, this PhD watch symbolised her

presence wherever he went during that period of academic job interviews in different

countries. In Alan's mind, Yuan is always near-by so that he does not feel lonely. When she

was not around, he wanted to secure his feeling of her love by having one of his important

possessions with him, i.e. a watch that Alan received from her to celebrate his PhD

graduation. Although they were physically apart during that time, the watch was with him in

every single presentation as if she were in the presentations with him and in every interview

to support him. *"In the way, I felt that my wife was there with me"*.

> Alan: *"She gave me a watch to check time. It was after I completed my PhD... To check time while doing my presentation in job interviews. I needed to know how much time I have left while doing my presentation (for job interviews). You can't look for a clock while doing your presentation. So I put the watch on the desk. Travelling (for interviews for academic jobs) was really hard. I still remembered I finished my presentation in Washington... came back to Hong Kong... the next day... I left for Lancaster. I was in a GMT -8 place (Washington) then back to a GMT +8 place (Hong Kong) and then went to a GMT place (Lancaster) within one or two weeks. That was really painful. The watch was with me in every single presentation. In the way, I felt that my wife was there with me. When I looked at my watch, it reminds me of her giving me the watch."*

Eris told the final story about his important possession, a music box he had bought for Yuan

as a gift. Consumption behaviours/ patterns have changed from having a symbolic emphasis

to having a functional emphasis as Alan's romantic relationship with Yuan entered another

stage and has grown stronger and more stable, i.e. from dating stage to marriage stage (Holt

1997). As Joy (2001) noted "when the couple begins to discuss commitment and marriage,

the nature of giving changes again: gifts become more personal and are linked to the

recipient's specific needs" (p. 249). Following Yuan's wishes of wanting to have more

functional gifts, Alan changed his gift purchase patterns to be more functional instead of

symbolic. He bought a relatively practical and functional item, i.e. a musical box for her to

keep her jewellery in. Yuan prefers to receive gifts from him that have more functional

purposes so that she can keep it for a longer time. Alan cherishes every gift that he has given

to Yuan as always his important possessions. They all brought Alan enormous pleasure as

Yuan likes the gifts. Although the box is very practical, he invested time and effort to pick

the right music box with their favourite song of "Love Story" to express his love towards her.

> Alan: *"I have been giving her lots of stuff. But somehow stuff I bought recent year doesn't last for a long time. She said that she liked practical stuff. So I changed my*

buying behaviour to buy her something that she can use. I really like the song "Love story". That music box plays that song. And also there is a kissing photo of a boy and a girl in the box... really nice. I still remember a wooden case."

To summarize, Alan's important possession stories reveal his stable self-development in terms of his closest relationship with his wife, Yuan. His relational dimension of the self is dominant in his possession stories. Alan's predominant possession stories are related to securing, enhancing and cultivating his loving relationship with Yuan. His important possession stories are like a love story with a temporal sequence from the first time they met to the present time in which they are married. His insecure self is interwoven between his past self (e.g. without his parents' affection and love) and his present self (e.g. wanting to be loved by Yuan). Interestingly, apart from a pair of watches and his PhD watch, none of his important possessions physically belongs to Alan. The ownership is essentially psychological that his important possessions are gifts that Alan has given to Yuan.

All of his important possession stories are linked to his relationship with his wife reflecting his relational dimension of the self. In contrast, there was no story that is related to his personal and collective dimensions of the self. Thus, his pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the complete relational self-configuration. A meaningful relationship with his wife, Yuan results in including her in the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). There was no story linking to his collective dimension of the self, resulting in no overlapping in Alan's personal self. As Figure 4.3 shows, Alan's personal self is completely overlapped by incorporating his wife in his self.

In terms of his self-possession boundary, Alan's important possessions included gifts that he had bought for and *given* to Yuan, i.e. the *extended possessions* (as marked * in Figure 4.3) in the same manner as he views his self that is largely incorporated with Yuan.
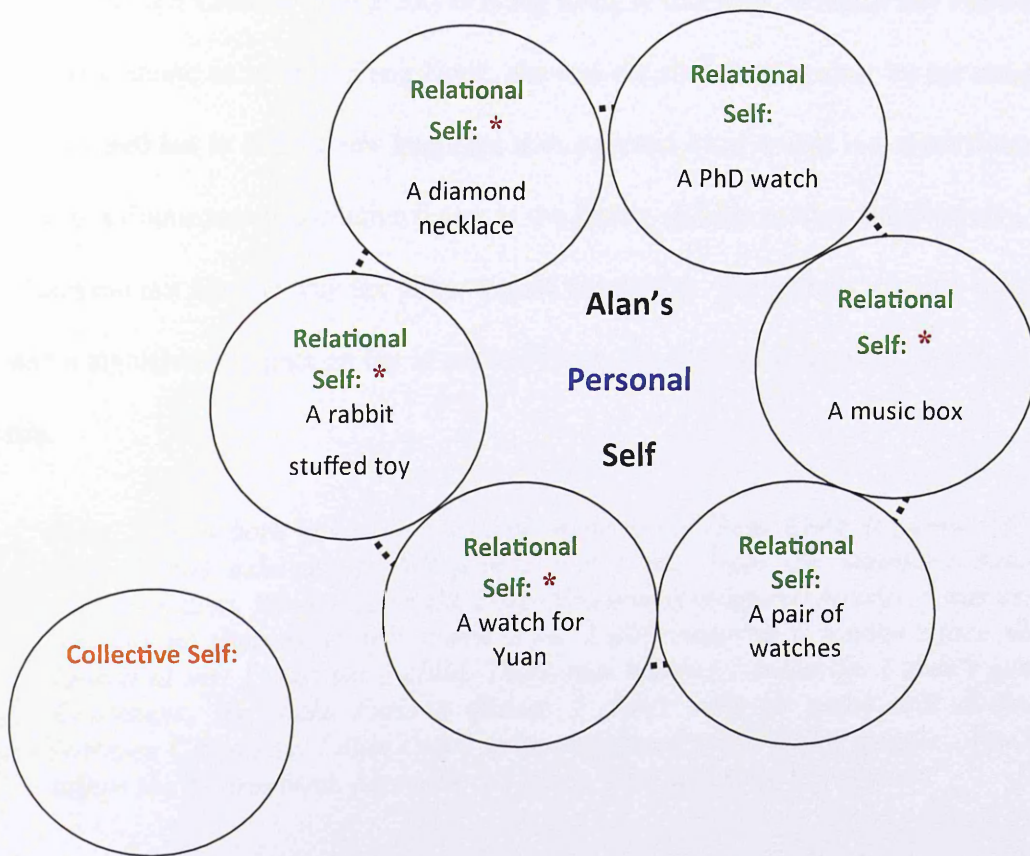
Figure 4.3: Alan's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the self

*= Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their possessions

4.3.2 Kate

4.3.2.1 Kate's Life Narrative

Kate is a 39-year old fashion boutique owner who has had a number of different turning points of "epiphanies" in her life that shape who she is at present (Denzin 1989), e.g. being a Chinese mainland immigrant in Hong Kong, getting married and divorced, and the death of her father. Due to the hardships of the Cultural Revolution in China, Kate's family gave up everything and fled to Hong Kong for a better life when she was a little girl. Life was not easy for mainland Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong at that time. Without any knowledge of Cantonese Chinese as used in Hong Kong, she was discriminated against by her neighbours. That motivated her to learn a new language with a perfect local accent in a short time. Kate's father was a dominant authoritative figure in the family and her mother submissively obeyed him. Kate did not like the way her father treated her mother. Her parents' marital relationship has had a significant impact on her in terms of how she dealt with her own marriage later in her life.

> *Kate: "I was born in China. My family migrated to Hong Kong 30 years old. At that time, I was ashamed to tell people that I was from the mainland because of discrimination. When I was little, I was discriminated against heavily. I was very dirty wearing no slippers. People stared at me. I still remember a woman's face when she looked at me. I was just a child. There was nothing I could do. I didn't speak any Cantonese. We spoke Fujiang dialect. I didn't want to speak that dialect after learning Cantonese. I didn't want to be associated with Fujiang people...You have to adjust the environment. My motto for life is "Live and seize the moment".*

Looking back at her childhood, Kate has nothing to complain about but rather to be thankful for because she had had so many opportunities in her life. *"What's the point to complain? We are very lucky in Hong Kong. I, this kind of poor girl, was lucky to study abroad. I got so many opportunities to do lots of things."* Kate did not give up when life is hard *"Although I was poor, I tried my best to get different kinds of opportunities..."* She strives for challenges and better living. *"I was more active than the others."*

Kate is not satisfied with an ordinary life having a simple job. She is afraid of becoming *"a fat housewife"* with children (her undesired self) *"Like the old days, once you finish your high school... get a mediocre job as a clerk... get married ... be fat and have kids... This is the worst scenario."* In contrast to the undesired self-image of *"a fat housewife"* with children, her desired self is to have her own career and to have freedom to achieve what she wants. *"Deep down, I wanted to have my own career. I am proud of myself. I grew up in a poor family... got a couple of thousand US dollars... went to the US to pursue my studies."*

Kate met her ex-husband, John, who is from a well off family, in high school. After finishing their GCSEs, John was sent to the US to further his studies by his family. Kate decided to go along despite her family's objection. John finished his studies and wanted to go back to Hong Kong. Although Kate had not finished her own studies, she decided to quit and they came back together. This puppy love finally blossomed and they were married soon afterwards. John wanted to please Kate and loved her so much that he would buy her whatever things she asked for. Kate had a luxurious lifestyle driving Mercedes, living in a nice apartment, buying luxurious branded items and having tea in five-star hotels. She was content and happy that life could not be any better than that. Unfortunately, the marriage broke down six years ago because one day John simply left the house without giving any reasons. Reflecting on what happened during that time, Kate realized that she was authoritative in her own marriage, just like her father. *"He was very authoritative and my mum is always gentle and listens to him. I guess I picked my dad's role and became my dad in my own marriage. I destroyed my own marriage."*

Kate was heart-broken and did not know why her lovely husband had just left without a word. Due to her financial difficulties, Kate found a job as a clerk (her undesired self) with a basic salary to support herself. Kate did not and could not accept the fact that John was gone and it took her four years to come to terms with the reality. At the same time, her father was sick

and, soon after, he passed away. It was a turning point in Kate's life, a *"wake-up call"*. Kate took that moment to reflect on, i.e. *"have a good look at"* herself really hard and decided to change her life (self-change) by quitting the job, her undesired job as a clerk, and taking control of her life again.

> Kate: *"If I didn't blame him, maybe we could have mended the relationship. I have to accept whom I was at that stage. Nobody could have forced me to behave or think differently. I needed to grow up and accept myself. I thank God for giving me that experience... it is like a wake-up call that I could not have that kind of character any more... Until this divorce, it was really painful. I needed to have a good look at myself and change myself. The change was good for me in the future."*

Now Kate is her own boss and has a fashion boutique. Her desired self of being successful in a career has become her actual self. She rationalized her experience and has concluded that she has accepted who she is after all the past pleasant or painful experiences. Her past self shapes who she is at present, as part of a life learning process. In addition, Kate gained control of her life again financially. She has bought an apartment for herself and enjoys different hobbies, e.g. diving and travelling around the world. Kate is trying very hard to rebuild her life after all the hard times earlier and to cultivate her new identity as a single woman.

> Kate: *"Whatever becoming better or worse, it is not the same person as it was in the old day. The world is so big. I already put a full stop. Finish is finish. Let bygone be bygone. Let go. I have changed a lot... Whatever you do, as long as you can accept yourself, that is already good enough. This is me. Without those experiences in the past, it would not be me. This is me. We can't complain and blame it. It is just a process of becoming a person, yourself. What's the point to get upset? ... You learn from the process. It is such a waste if you don't learn anything from the process."*

Being a divorcee, she realized that John was very nice to her. *"Currently, I am more touched. I didn't cherish him at that time. When I looked back, I realized nobody would treat me that nice. Not any more."* Although Kate has become what she always dreamt of, being a successful career woman with a busy lifestyle, she is not content. Kate wants to be loved and to have somebody to share her life with.

Kate: "Sometimes I had HKD 10,000 (£667) sales turnover a day. I was so happy that I wanted to share with somebody. Then I realized that I didn't have anybody to share my happiness. I guess it is a trade-off for me that I don't have a husband now but I have my own business. Spiritually, to certain extent, I am not content... If I can't find a partner to share something like a book I just read... this is the mental state I have. All good men are married!"

However, Kate is afraid of find a wrong man in a relationship. Kate is in a dilemma, facing a dialectic tension in her narratives between her desired self as wanting to be loved and her feared self as being hurt from a relationship. Therefore, she chose a strategy *"let it be"* to deal with this issue and hoped that she would find someone in the near future.

Kate: "I haven't dated anybody for 7 or 8 years...It is hard to find somebody like him [her husband] as we grow older, we are more protective... especially I would be the one who is more caution... What if somebody purposefully wants to hurt you... it is no point to tell my stuff to people I don't know well. Of course I want to find somebody. But if you find somebody nice, are you scared? I myself would be scared."

4.3.2.2 Analysis of Kate's Stories about Her Important Possessions: the Complete Relational Self-Configuration

As Table 4.5 shows, Kate defines herself mainly based on these two identities in the relational dimensions of the self (e.g. a divorcee and a daughter. There was no story relating to her personal and collective dimensions of the self. Thus, Kate's pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the complete relational self-configuration. In addition, unlike most of the informants whose important possessions are related to significant others in existing relationships, the things Kate regarded as important possessions are all linked to disconnected relationships, i.e. her disconnected relationships with her ex-husband, John and her deceased father. Her narratives revolve around her identity negotiation between a married woman and a divorcee in a liminal stage, and her memories of her deceased father. In the light of her self-possession boundaries, all Kate's possession stories are about gifts that she *received* from her close others, in contrast to Alan's narratives about gifts that he had *given* for his wife.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Kate's important possessions
Personal Self	-	-
Relational Self	Identity negotiation in a disconnected relationship – a liminal stage	1) A gift of a vintage watch from John
		2) A gift of a "Big Mouth" cartoon watch from John
		3) A gift of a Titus "Everlasting love" watch from John
		4) A gift of a Rolex from John
	Enhancing & strengthening relationship with romantic partner	1) A gift of a vintage watch from John
		2) A gift of a "Big Mouth" cartoon watch from John
		3) A gift of a Titus "Everlasting love" watch from John
		4) A gift of a Rolex from John
	Memories of the past with significant others	1) A gift of a vintage watch from John
		2) A gift of a "Big Mouth" cartoon watch from John
		3) A gift of a Titus "Everlasting love" watch from John
		4) A gift of a Rolex from John
		5) A gift of an Albert watch from her father
		6) Some photos
	Affirming familial relationship	A gift of an Albert watch from her father
Collective Self	-	

Table 4.5: Kate's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Kate narrated four stories about her important possessions that are linked to her disconnected relationship with her ex-husband, John. In these stories about her disconnected relationship with John, Kate often found herself facing a dialectic tension in her narratives. There is her past self "being loved" vs. her present self "being lonely"; her dilemma between "successful at work" and "unsuccessful in love"; her identity negotiation of "holding on" vs. "letting go" and her desire of "wanting to be loved" vs. "scared to find someone whom she can love". She was often caught between the stages of identity disposition, identity discovery and identity construction within role identity development of reconstruction of the self (Kleine and Kleine 2000).

All these four important possessions are gifts from her ex-husband, John. These possession stories are woven around a love storyline from the time they fell in love (her important

possession of a vintage style watch), the first time they were apart (her important possession of a Titus "Everlasting Love" watch), their happy time in the US (her important possession of a "Big Mouth" cartoon watch) and John's love for Kate (her important possession of a Rolex).

Kate began her first story about a gift of a vintage style watch by situating her narrative in the period when John and Kate just met more than 20 years ago. They were dating when they met in high school. John was so in love with Kate that he would try to give her a lot of surprises whenever he could (Belk and Coon 1993). The vintage style watch marks the beginning of their loving relationship. The watch symbolizes her past relational self as John's girlfriend and feeling loved. This gift-giving served to strengthen the relational effect at this dating stage (Ruth et al. 1999).

> Kate: "We were dating at that time... It (the watch) was so popular at that time to have vintage style watches. He noticed that I like one of the watches there. He secretly bought it and gave it to me at Christmas. He was very fond of me at that time.

Kate's second story about her important possession of a Titus watch symbolised their strengthening relationship during their dating stage. After Kate and John completed their GCSEs, John's family decided to send him to the US to further his studies. That was the first time they had been apart. John wanted to reassure Kate of his love for her. Before leaving, John bought a special love series of Titus watch with engraved words "Everlasting Love" at the back of the watch for Kate to remember his love and commitment. People retell and reinterpret meanings of the past events through the tangible manifestations of possessions depending on their present conditions (Bih 1992). Kate described how they were apart and how happy and sweet she was in the past. However, with her present self as a divorcee, Kate narrated how this watch was associated with memories of their relationship in the past and

with bittersweet emotions at the present (Belk et al. 1989) *"Forget it. It's over. It was the past!"*

> Kate: *"The second watch is from him. When he studied aboard, he bought me a Titus. It was the first time we were separated. I didn't wanna let him go. Therefore, he bought me that watch. It was that special love series with the slogan of "It doesn't matter whether we cannot be together forever, the important thing is we have each other at this moment". It was HKD 700 (£47) something.*
>
> Interviewer: *"Is that the one with engraving of "Everlasting Love" at the back of the watch?"*
>
> Kate: *"Yes. (Sigh) Forget it. It's over. It was the past."*

Kate went to the US despite her family's objection. Kate and John were finally reunited. They had a happy time together in the US. Kate continued narrating her third story about her important possession of a "Big Mouth" watch that she received as a gift from John. As always, John wanted to surprise Kate by buying or getting something special for her. John secretly asked his friend to buy a "Big Mouth Boy" Cartoon watch, i.e. Kate's favourite cartoon character, for her. The watch was not available in Hong Kong. John's friend bought it when he visited in Japan. In agapic love, people sacrifice and invest their time, money and effort to give a gift that will please their partners and do not expect their partners to reciprocate (Belk and Coon 1993).

Kate, at that time, took John for granted and thought that this is the way a boyfriend should behave. Looking back on everything that John did for her, she is more touched than before because now she cherishes these kinds of moments when John is no longer around. *"Currently, I am more touched. I didn't cherish them at that time. When I looked back, I realized nobody would treat me that nice. Not any more."* Repeatedly, from her past self of being in love, Kate came back to the present time after her narration and realized that John is no longer hers. She sighed and persuaded herself to *"forget it"*.

Kate: ""Little Big Mouth" watch. We were in the US at that moment. He knew that I loved that cartoon character. He asked somebody who was on the way to Hong Kong... bought it... via Japan... came back to the US."

Interviewer: "Were all watches surprises for you?"

Kate: "Yes. All of them."

Interviewer: "So you were very touched."

Kate: "Currently, I am more touched. I didn't cherish them at that time. When I looked back, I realized nobody would treat me that nice. Not any more."

Interviewer: "He was really nice."

Kate: "(Sighed) Forget it. Don't talk about it. (Note: She started to cry)"

During the interview, Kate re-emphasised how both the interviewer and herself should address John as *"her EX-HUSBAND"*. She consciously kept trying to remind herself of her present self as being "divorced". Kate continued narrating her fourth story about her important possession of a Rolex that marked her past blossoming relationship with John. John worked as an architect in Hong Kong after he completed his studies. Before going back to Hong Kong, they got married in Canada. Then Kate stayed in San Francisco try to finish her own studies while John started his first job. Separation was not easy. Kate decided to quit her studies to go to Hong Kong. Once again, John wanted to show his affection on this reunion by using his first salary to buy her an expensive watch, i.e. a Rolex. Kate narrated how John invested time and energy to acquire the gift for her by saving his salary for a few months and planned a surprise for her when picking her up from the airport (Sherry 1983). The watch not only has the culturally shared meanings of an expensive branded expensive prestige watch, but also includes their special idiosyncratic shared symbolic and emotional meanings that indicated their close relationship (Montgomery 1988, Ruth et al. 1999).

Kate: "Rolex."

Interviewer: "You got it from your husband?"

Kate: "No. It is from my EX-HUSBAND!! He bought it for me. I am not married now. It was the first time he received his first salary. He bought the watch for me. After we

got married in Canada, I went to study in San Francisco and he went back to Hong Kong to work. We were separated for four months (after the wedding). He saved it for four months. When we met again at the airport, he gave it to me. It was a surprise again. This is my first luxury watch and still the only luxury watch. I think the current price of that model is about HKD 30,000 (£2,000) something."

By narrating her four stories about her important possessions that she received as gifts from John, Kate realized that she is still at a liminal stage of negotiating her past self as a married woman and her present self as a divorcee (Gentry et al. 1995). Kate is in the process of identity reconstruction and her narrative captures the dialectic tension experienced as a divorcee within her identity role project. The negotiation process of letting go of some things (e.g. returning all her wedding albums to John) whilst keeping hold of other things amongst their meaningful possessions often helped her cope with loss and to adjust to change in this liminal phase of life transitions: *"I miss him. I guess he has become another person. Let bygone be bygone"*.

> Kate: *"I didn't understand what love was. Somebody loved me so much but I didn't realise it and return it to him. I took it for granted and blame him all the time... I haven't dated anybody for about 7 or 8 years. I am not angry at him any more. What's the point? In fact, we were both hurt (in the relationship). We need to forgive and forget... If he (her ex) comes back to me, I don't think I want him anyway. He has changed. I miss him, the "old" him. We have both changed."*

Apart from these important possession stories about gifts from John, Kate narrated two other stories about her important possessions (an Albert watch and some photos) that were related to her deceased father signifying her past affirming familial relationship and her memories of her deceased father. Kate's father passed away seven years ago. There are two possessions that are linked to her father and that are precious to her. The first one is a watch she received as a gift when she was 15 years old. It was a ritual in her family that all her siblings received a watch from their father when they reached 15 years old. When Kate received the watch, she felt like she had reached the stage of being an adult. The watch reminded her of that happy moment with her father. Although her father passed away some time ago, the father-daughter

relationship did not end after her father passed away. Kate has kept her relationship with her deceased father alive at another level by focusing on good memories of her father (Nasim 2007).

Kate: "The last one... I got this watch from my dad when I was 15 years old. The brand name is something... Al... Albert... it was popular at that time... even advertising on TV. It was the first watch I wore to school. Dad gave us a watch when we reached 15."

Interviewer: "It's like a milestone."

Kate: "It's like when you are an adult, you got a watch coz at that time watches were quite precious."

Kate: "Of course... very much. We had some good times and bad times. ... Anyway, the feeling I have now is different. I could console myself that it's gone. But when it comes to details, say see some elderly... that reminds me of my dad. Then I realized I still miss him."

Photos are often constructed by people to capture a particular moment of happiness (Belk 1987). Kate narrated her final story about the photos that reminded her of memories of her deceased father. Kate cherishes her photos of her father or those taken with her father because she does not have a second chance to capture the same moment again. These moments of father-daughter relationships are kept and frozen in a certain way so that Kate can always remember the good times with her father, from her childhood, teenage years and adulthood. "Possessions bring past meanings into the present and maintain present meanings. Possessions also help them project themselves in to the future, even beyond death" (Kleine and Baker 2004: 9).

Kate: "Lots of items. But ... photos. Coz you don't have a second chance to take it again. If you don't take it at that moment, the moment will be gone and you will not have a second chance to take it again. I am not that materialistic any more. I don't have any wedding photos any more. I returned all the albums to him. I am talking about photos with my dad. Something money can't buy.

To summarize, Kate's four important possession stories that are linked to her ex-husband reveal her on-going changing process (identity negotiation) in her self-development in terms of her identity negotiation between a married woman and a divorcee in a disconnected relationship with her husband, John. Her possession themes in these four stories are related to enhancing and strengthening her relationship with John in the past and identity negotiation in a liminal stage at present. Apart from stories that are related to her ex-husband, Kate also has two other possession stories (an Albert watch and photos) that are linked to her deceased father. Kate's possession themes in these two stories are linked to her affirming familial relationship in the past and memories of her deceased father in the present.

Kate's relational dimension of the self is dominant in her stories about important possessions reflecting on her disconnected relationships with her ex-husband and her deceased father. In contrast, there was no story that is related to her personal dimension of the self and her collective dimension of the self. As a result, Kate's pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the complete relational self-configuration. Kate regarded her ex-husband and her deceased father as part of her self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). As Figure 4.4 shows, Kate's personal self is completely overlapped by incorporating her ex-husband and her deceased father within her self. No story linking to her collective dimension of the self was revealed in her stories resulting in no overlapping in Kate's personal self.

At the end of all her stories in the interview, she made a significant concluding remark that:

"Whatever you do, as long as you can accept yourself... that is already good enough. This is me. Without those experiences in the past, it would not be me. This is me."

Kate is trying to rationalize that things happened for a reason and she has to accept whatever happened in the past and move on with her life in her identity reconstruction.
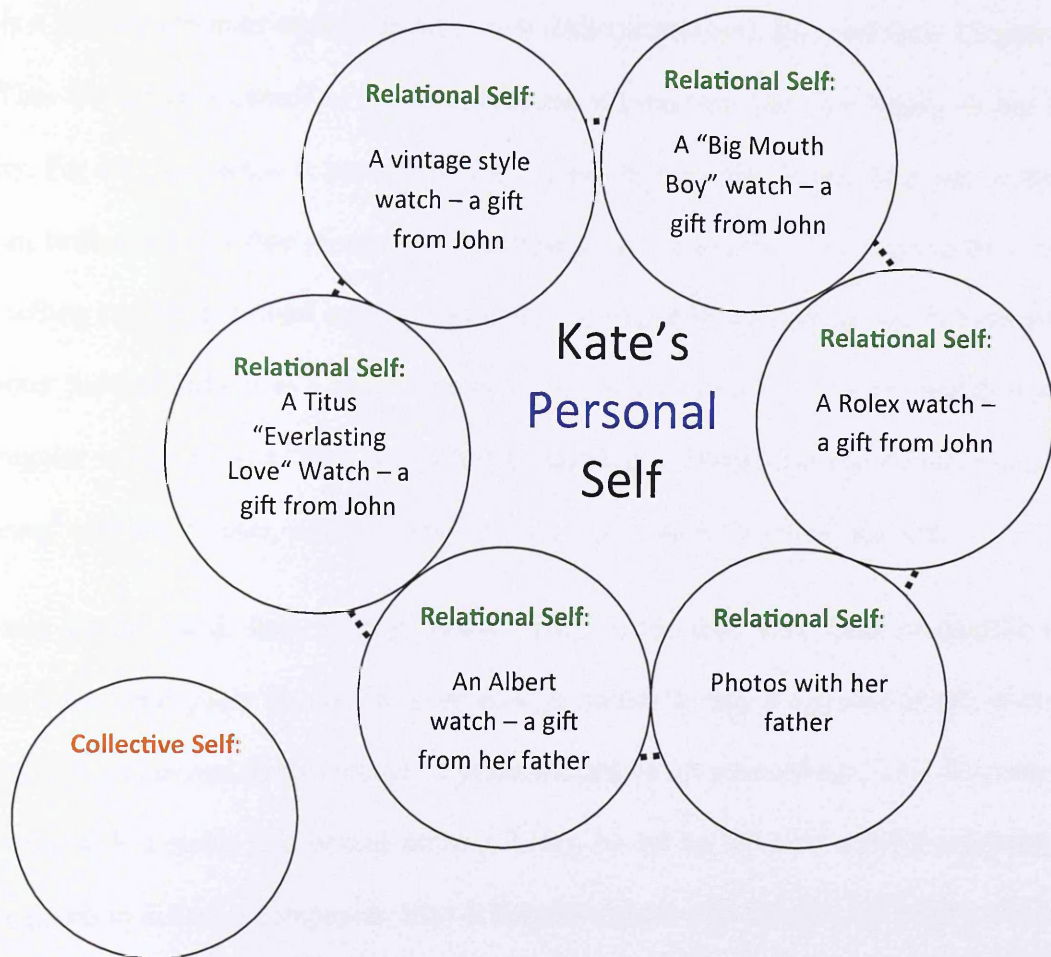
Figure 4.4: Kate's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

4.3.3 May

4.3.3.1 May's Life Narrative

May is a 38-year old married woman who lives with her husband, Roy and their 15-year old son, Tim. She regards herself as a typical Chinese woman who puts her family as her first priority. For her, her family is her universe and is her first priority in life. May just wants to have an ordinary stress-free nine-to-five job with a decent income. She used to be a sales clerk selling crystal in a hotel souvenir shop, a receptionist in a company and is currently a Customer Service Officer in a watch company. She enjoys earning her own pocket money with regular working hours. May enjoys family gatherings. During her spare time, she plays mah-jong[8] with her parents, sister or family and outings with her husband and son.

May met her husband, Roy, in high school. They found jobs after their graduation and worked for several years in order to save enough money to buy a flat and to get married. They have been married for more than 17 years and have a 15-year old son, Tim. Roy was an electrician with a stable and decent income. Later, he set up his own courier company to deliver goods to different companies. May is largely content with her life, i.e. having a loving husband, a mortgage-free flat, groups of family members and friends, a stable job giving her extra money to have short holiday trips to Asia (e.g. Thailand, Taiwan or Japan) every year. The only thing that worries her is her relationship with her son. Tim is a teenage boy and May finds it hard to communicate with him.

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[8] Mah-jong is a traditional Chinese game played by four players and is viewed as one of the typical Chinese activities and social gatherings. It is a popular gambling game for Chinese to play in their spare time. Mah-jong is played in different social settings, i.e. wedding banquets, birthday parties, traditional Chinese celebrations, festivals, family gatherings or Mah-jong game centres. This game normally is played by four players who are friends or relatives.

4.3.3.2 Analysis of May's Stories about Her Important Possessions: the Complete Relational Self-Configuration

As Table 4.6 shows, the things May regarded as important possessions are all linked to the relational dimension of the self reflecting on her identities as a wife being loved and cared by her husband Roy, as a mother trying to improve her troubled relationship with her teenage son and as a friend building up friendships with her close friends. "Being cared by Roy" and "caring for others", reflecting the relational dimension of the self, are the main themes in May's narratives. There was no story relating to her personal and collective dimensions of the self. As a result, May's pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the complete relational self-configuration. May defines herself mainly based on these three identities in the relational dimension of the self (a wife, a mother and a friend). Her narratives revolve around enhancing her relationship with her husband, her struggling relationship with her teenage son and her affirm friendships with her friends.

In terms of her self-possession boundary, May regarded gifts that she received from her husband and friend and some other objects as her important possessions. In addition, May not only considers gifts that she had *given* to her friends (i.e. *extended possessions*) but also objects that actually belong to close others (e.g. her son's small gold ornaments) as her important possessions suggesting May might have a broader view of her self-possession boundaries.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about May's important possessions
Personal self	-	-
Relational self	Enhancing and strengthening relationships	1) A gift of Seiko watch received from her husband
		2) A wedding album
		3) A wedding anniversary gift of a Rolex watch received from her husband
	Affirming relationships	1) A gift of a "Forever Friend" watch received from her friend and May bought the same watch for her friend as a gift
		2) A gift of a Titus "everlasting love" watch for her friend
	Memories of the past with specific person(s)	1) A gift of Seiko watch from her husband
		2) A wedding album
		3) A wedding anniversary gift of a Rolex watch from her husband
		4) Some small gold ornaments that belong to her son
		5) A gift of a "Forever Friend" watch received from her friend and May bought the same watch for her friend as a gift
		6) A gift of a Titus "everlasting love" watch for her friend
Collective self	-	-

Table 4.6: May's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

May narrated three stories about her important possessions reflecting her identity as a wife being cared by her husband Roy. Each possession marks a special stage in their relationship, from dating, wedding and anniversary symbolising their enhancing and strengthening relationship. May began with her first story about the gift of a Seiko watch that she has received from Roy, her husband, when she was still his girlfriend. This story is one of their special memories marking the beginning of their dating stage. Roy had just finished his GCSEs and was working as an electrician. In order to celebrate his first salary, he did not buy any gift to reward himself (self-gift). Instead, he celebrated his achievement by buying a Seiko watch for May. These kinds of behaviours are often found in self-gift Chinese empirical data that Chinese tend to share their rewards with others (Joy et al. 2006). Also, this is what Belk and Coon (1993) called agapic love gift-giving in that the giver gives a gift to

the recipient in order to send a message of love and do not expect the recipient to reciprocate the act. The gift-giving served a strengthening relational purpose in this dating stage (Ruth et al. 1999). For May, the watch is a memorable watch because it marked a particular moment in their history of their initial dating relationship. It was at the time that they had just completed high school, started to work with little money and were in the process of saving up money for their wedding.

May's next important possession is her wedding album that marks that she entered into another life stage from being from Roy's girlfriend to being Roy's wife. It was her *"once in a life time"* moment and she wanted it to be memorable. For example, she spent a lot of money on renting her wedding dress. However, it was worth it because it was *"once in a life time and Roy supported me to do it"*. Possessions are like testimonies or milestones that mark different life events and transitions in people's lives. This wedding album records a particular moment from their lives, reminds them of their commitment made in the past and encourages them to continue loving one another in the future. For May, this possession serves as a function to enhance and cultivate their relationship. The wedding album reminds her of her happy day with sweet emotions *"never get a chance to have another one"* and the celebration of their love as a married couple.

> *May: "The wedding album... you never get a chance to have another one. I want to look at it from time to time. We spent quite a lot in our wedding. The wedding dress... it was HKD 6,000 (£400) rental per day... we are talking about 17 years ago. That was crazy... but I loved it. You know, once in a life time and Roy supported me to do it. We went through all the tradition Chinese ritual... tea ceremony... brushing hair ritual..."*

Interestingly, as their love grows strong, the gifts that May received from Roy are more expensive. As her love story continues, she reflected on her affection for her third important possession, which was the gift of a Rolex watch from Roy to celebrate her birthday and to mark their 10th wedding anniversary. May remarked, *"My husband knows that I love diamonds... the black front case with diamonds"*. Roy wanted to show his deep affection toward May through the value of the expensive gift. For them, a Rolex watch not only has symbolic and emotional meanings of their love, but also has an instrumental reference to investment value or financial security (Richins 1994b, Dittmar 1989). The price and value of Rolex watches remains high in the second-hand market.

This watch not only had the culturally shared meanings of being a prestigious branded expensive watch, but also was imbued with their special idiosyncratic shared symbolic meanings that indicated their close relationship (Montgomery 1988, Ruth et al. 1999). May and Roy have built their relationship from their history in the past, to their interaction in the present and their projection of their commitment in the future (Andersen 1993). Roy showed his desire and commitment in his marriage and showered different gifts on May in order to maintain this solid relationship with May as Denzin (1989) called "major events... which touch... every fabric of a person's life" (p. 71).

> May: *"The first one is Rolex. My husband bought it 10 years ago and said that he would not buy me any birthday presents within these 10 years. That was what he said. For us, the watch is really expensive. It was HKD 33,000 (£2,200). The black front case with diamonds... My husband knows that I love diamonds. I seldom use it. I have worn less than 10 times. But this watch has very memorable value. If you resell it, you can get HKD 20,000 (£1,334) to HKD 30,000 (£2,000). I don't think I would do that. It was a gift for my birthday and anniversary... My husband thinks that watches are good items. The resell price is high... high value. The value and price of Rolex remain high and therefore, he bought it for me. This is the most expensive watch in my life. I only wear it when I go to a Chinese banquet."*

In contrast to her identity as a wife with a loving relationship with her husband, May seems to have a struggling relationship as a mother with her son. For her fourth possession story, May shared a story about some small gold ornaments that actually did not belong to her. They belonged to her son, Tim who had received these gifts from relatives and friends to celebrate his first month birthday ("*full moon*") as a baby. These small gold ornaments carried a symbolic linkage of her mother-son relationship with Tim. Although these possessions do not belong to her, she cherishes them and views them as part of her extended self. May had a sweet memory of her son when he was a boy and they had spent a great deal of time playing together. Now Tim is a teenager who would rather spend time with his friends playing basketball and outdoor activities. In May's eyes, Tim is still like a little boy. Self changes in different life stages. Tim is no longer a little boy. In contrast, he is a teenager. Although these small gold figures are associated with memories of Tim's childhood in the past, they also contain bittersweet emotions for the present (Belk et al. 1989). May talked about how naughty and difficult Tim is as a teenager at present comparing him to the younger Tim when he was a little boy. However, underneath the complaint, May showed her desire to get to know him better. She cares about Tim a lot and wants to find a way to communicate with him. May did not want to sell the small gold figures because they marked a special moment of her son's life stage as a baby, her past self as a mother of a baby. Looking at these small gold figures helps her relive and reconnect with that special moment with Tim and her desire to rebuild the relationship with Tim.

> May: *"Some small gold ornaments... they are not valuable enough for me to get money when reselling it. You know... that kind of necklace pendants... monkeys, hen... my mum told me to bundle everything together to exchange for some other items in a jewellery shop. They don't belong to me. They belong to my son... on his full month (first month old baby) party. My son was born in the year of the hen. We got lots of that figure in his party. I want to keep them. Until I don't have any money, I will sell it. I sold some gold in the past. But I thought there are meaningful. I don't want to sell them. We will wait until the last moment that we don't have any money."*

In addition, May defined herself through her friendships with close friends. May valued friendships with her friends and tried her best to cultivate their relationships. May explained the importance of friendship in her life as it helped define who she is (the affiliated relational self). She further described how she carefully chose a watch as a birthday gift for her friend and sent an explicit message of "forever friends" in her fifth story about her important possession. Although this possession did not belong to May, she viewed it as one of her important possessions (i.e. the *extended possession*) and used gift-giving as a tangible way to deliver an intangible and abstract idea of her appreciation of their friendship (Wang et al. 2001). To reciprocate this appreciation and the important message of "forever friends", May's friend bought exactly the same watch for May on her birthday reinforcing the significance of their friendship. These possessions serve an affirming meaning in their friendship.

> *May: "This one [important possessions] is a "Mickey Mouse Forever Friends" watch. I have known this friend for more than 20 years. She worked as a cosmetic consultant at a cosmetic counter. I got to know her when buying cosmetics from her counter. We still keep contact now.... We became mah-jong friends. I first bought one "Forever Friends" watch for her on her birthday and then I got exactly the same from her on my birthday. Each of us has one. I like this watch because it has a special meaning. Also, I like Mickey Mouse. Plus it says Forever Friends."*

May further narrated a final story about her important possession that was a gift to another close friend of hers. May did not possess or own this gift but viewed it as part of her important possession (i.e. the *extended possession*). Again, May carefully chose a watch engraved with "Everlasting Love" on the back cover of the watch for her close friend to convey a message of *"friendship forever"* and her appreciation of the friendship. This gift had an enhancing and strengthening relational effect that May wanted to secure, cultivate and elevate a positive emotion in this friendship and hoped this friendship would last *"forever"* (Ruth et al. 1999).

May: "I bought it for my friend. I had a really close friendship with her therefore I bought this watch for her. It is engraved "Everlasting Love" at the back cover of the watch. You know the pop stars Miu and Leslie Chang were on that advertisement. It was really touching. I bought this one for her."

To summarize, May constructed her sense of self largely through her relationships with her husband, son and friends. She cherishes her relationships with her husband, son and close friends. Her family is always a first priority in her life. All her possessions in her narratives are related to her significant others (e.g. her stable relationship with her husband, her changing relationship with her son and her affirming relationships with her friends). Her relational dimension of the self is completely dominant in her possession stories. All of her important possession stories emphasize her relational dimension of the self. In contrast, there was no story revealing her personal and collective dimensions of the self. In other words, May's pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the complete relational self-configuration.

In terms of her self-possession boundary, apart from her gifts received from her husband, May not only regarded gifts that she had given to her friends as her important possessions (i.e. the *extended possessions*) but also considered her son's possessions (e.g. small gold ornaments) as her own suggesting that May had a broader view of her self-possession boundaries.

All May's important possessions are related to her significant others. "Being loved and cared by Roy" and "caring for the others" are the main themes in May's narratives. In other words, meaningful relationships with her husband, her son and her friends result in including them in the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). There was no story linking to her collective dimension of the self, resulting in no overlapping in May's personal self. As Figure 4.5 shows, May's personal self is completely overlapped by incorporating her husband, son and close friends

within her self. May's identities as a wife to Roy, a mother to Tim and friends to her close friend help her to define who she is.
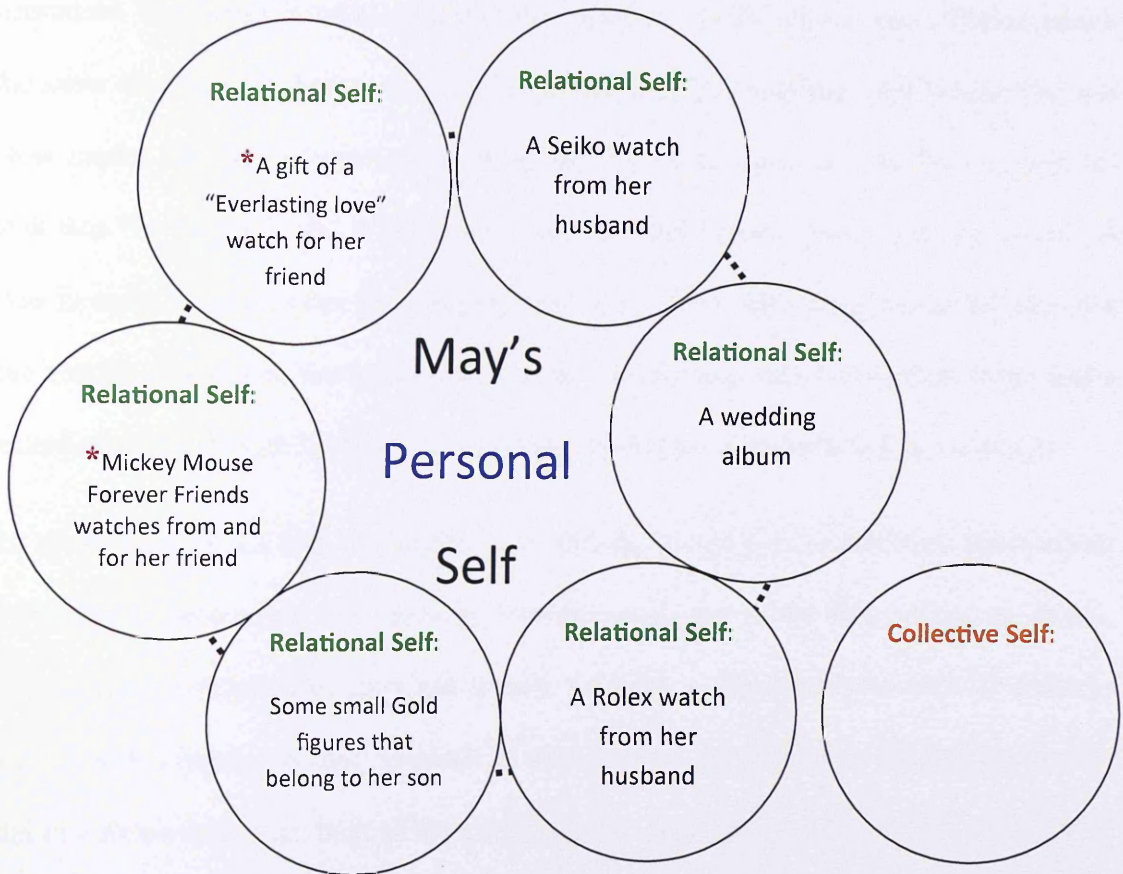
Figure 4.5: May's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the self

* = **Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their possessions**

4.3.4 Peter

4.3.4.1 Peter's Life Narrative

Peter is a 36-year old construction site engineer. He emigrated from mainland China with his family when he was a child. Peter is a devoted Christian who grew up in a church environment. The family lived in a room in the church as Peter's mother was a live-in janitor in the same church. Peter had a very close relationship with his mother, Mrs Wong. She was his role model. Mrs Wong was hard working and full of love and care. In Peter's eyes, his mother was "invincible". Mrs Wong could cook delicious Chinese food, knit, and mend old clothes in order to save money from buying new ones. At the same time, she could take care of the church as a janitor there. In contrast to his relationship with his mother, Peter had a detached relationship with his father. Both parents passed away more than five years ago.

After completing his GCSEs, he enrolled in a diploma program in engineering construction and became a construction site engineer. Unfortunately, due to the Hong Kong economic downturn, the construction industry has shrunk. Recently, it has been quite hard for Peter to find a job with a regular income. In terms of relationships and friendship, Peter met his wife, Danni in a fellowship when both of them attended the same group in the fellowship 20 years ago. They were married in 1999. Danni is Peter's pillar of life after his mother's death. In addition, Peter has a group of close friends called a cell group in the fellowship that he has known for more than 20 years. Peter cherishes the friendship with them and frequently seeks advice from them.

4.3.4.2 Analysis of Peter's Stories about His Important Possessions: the Relationally-led Self-Configuration

As Table 4.7 shows, the things Peter regarded as important possessions revolve around his deceased parents, wife, friends on his relational dimension of the self, and his current work and financial struggle reflecting on his personal dimension of the self. There was no story relating to his collective dimension of the self. Most of Peter's important possessions are linked to his relational dimension of the self. Thus, his pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration.

Peter spent a lengthy of time to narrate three important possession stories that were related to his deceased mother, Mrs Wong who passed away 9 years ago. He spent most of his time in the interview retelling and reliving the experience through narrating details of the stories of these three important possessions (a precious sweater knitted by his mother, an old wore-out blanket, a film called the Sixth Sense). Although his mother died 9 years ago, he still misses her a lot. He wanted to hold on to the important possessions that belong to her in order to feel her presence as if he is holding on to the relationship with his mother (McAlexander 1991).

In terms of self-possession boundary, Peter regarded some self-gifts (e.g. his Swatch collection and Casio watches), gifts that he received from his wife and church friends (Swatch watches) and other objects (e.g. a film, a blanket and a Rolex watch) as his important possessions. In addition, Peter considered a gift of Swatch watch that he had *given* to his wife as one of his important possession (i.e. the *extended possession*) signifying his close relationship with her.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Peter's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Self-expression	Swatch collection
	Personal history	1) Swatch collection
		2) Galaxy Swatch
	Utilitarian	Casio watches
Relational Self	Enhancing & strengthening relationship with Danni	Two Swatch watches (The first Swatch is a gift for Danni and the second Swatch is a gift from Danni)
	Affirming friendship relationships	A gift of a Swatch watch received from his church friends
	Memories of the past with specific person(s)	1) His sweater knitted by his mother
		2) A film called the Sixth Sense
		3) A blanket
		4) A Rolex
		5) Swatch watches
		6) A gift of a Swatch watch received from his church friends
	Re-membering his deceased mother	His sweater knitted by his mother
		A film called the Sixth Sense
	Identity negotiation between the lost self and the new self	A blanket
Collective Self	-	-

Table 4.7: Peter's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Peter began to describe his deeper sense of loss when narrating his first story about a sweater knitted by his mother that he regarded as one of his important possessions. This sweater symbolized his past affiliated relational self of the relationship with his mother who passed away 9 years ago. As Romanyshyn (1989) noted, "Things are often the most poignant and painful reminders of someone's death." (p.194) Peter's mother was good at knitting and knitted many sweaters for him when he was young. Peter expressed his regret that he did not cherish any of the sweaters at that time. However, once his mother was gone, his sense of guilt and loss emerged. Peter realized how important it is for him to keep these sweaters in order to feel her presence. The sweater is so precious that he does not dare to wear it. As he said, "*you will never have a second one*". An ordinary knitted sweater has become a sacred item. The sacredness that Peter invests in his sweater reflects the importance of his mother's

status in his heart (Belk et al. 1989, Gentry et al. 1995). This knitted sweater helps Peter feel his deceased mother's presence.

> Peter: "A sweater that my mother knitted for me. I have only one left. I cherish it so much that I do not dare to wear it. I used to have quite many sweaters knitted by her. As I grew up, they didn't fit so that I threw them away. I didn't cherish them at that time. I have one left and I don't want to wear it... Sometimes when I clear my wardrobe, I might take it out and have a look... coz no more... you will never have a second one. I quite cherish it."

In the disconnected relationship with his deceased mother, Peter used a strategy of "re-membering[9]" his lost loved one on a different level (Myerhoff 1982). Over time, people accept the reality of the loss and learn how to find a way to include the lost loved ones in their life (Nasim 2007). Peter thinks about his deceased mother always, e.g. by touching the sweater, in his dreams, in the smell of stir fry smell from neighbours or via a film. He keeps his relationship with his deceased mother alive and connects with her on a different level.

> Peter: "I all the time think about her. Sometimes I still have that kind of sharp pain when thinking of her. A month ago, I dreamed about her. She didn't say anything. But she just smiled at me kindly. Even though I was sleeping, I could feel that I was crying in my dream. I felt that my heart was cramping... that was really hard. Some says time can "dilute" this feeling. I don't think so. Every time I am on my way home... passing by some flats... seeing some female neighbours cooking stir fry for dinner... I think about her. Of course, that kind of feeling is not that painful."

Peter continued his second possession story about a film call the Sixth Sense. Some possessions are painful, like taboos that people try to avoid (Gentry et al. 1995). Peter also has a "taboo" but very important possession, a film called the Sixth Sense. This film symbolizes his pain and regret (his regretted self) towards his deceased mother. Although he is learning how to deal with this pain, one or two things really touch Peter's heart so deeply that nothing can stop him from crying. One of them is a scene from this film. Peter unpacked his ambivalent emotions by recounting how he watched the film with his wife that night. His

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[9] Myerhoff (1982) suggested the term re-membering to describe how people redefine their relationships with the deceased and include them in their lives.

emotions just became uncontrollable when seeing a particular scene of the film. From that film, Peter realized that he had regret that he did not have a chance and would not be able to provide a comfortable and better living lifestyle for his mother to enjoy when she was alive *"I didn't do anything nice (or good) to my mum"*.

> Peter: *"One or two that I see… I can't help myself thinking about her. Every time I watch a film called the Sixth Sense[10]… I just can't watch it. Last time it was on TV, I knew that particular scene was coming. Danni asked me to leave the room. I went to the kitchen to avoid that scene. But I couldn't help myself crying. I didn't need to watch it. This part cannot be touched. But one or two things will always touch my heart deeply. There is no reason. Maybe… the film reminds me my regret. Coz I don't think… the film is about "Mum, are you proud of me?" When I think about it, I ask myself a question "do I have the guts to ask my mum the same question?" I don't think so. I didn't do anything nice (or good) to my mum. I regretted. Therefore, every time I watch that part, my emotion just gets really intense."*

In addition, Peter narrated his third story about his important possession, a blanket that he recently threw away signifying his dialectic tension (his dilemma self) of "holding on" and "letting go" of some possessions that belong to his deceased mother. Peter is still in a liminal stage of identity reconstruction negotiating between his past self as a son of his mother to his present self as a son of his deceased mother. His family was not that well off. His mother always tried to mend clothes and blankets instead of buying new ones in order to save money. It is a good image of virtue, i.e. *"smiled at me kindly"* that Peter always remembers. In his opinion, Mrs Wong sacrificed herself for the family, especially for her children. Peter used to have one blanket that Mrs Wong had mended and darned the edges of in order to repair it. Peter kept it for several years. As time went time, Peter started finding the courage to look at some of the possessions that reminded him of his deceased mother. It has been 9 years and he is still learning how to let go some of the emotions go by disposing of one of his precious items. His disposition of the blanket is a step that he takes in order to try to redefine his

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[10] That part of the film is about a woman always goes to the graveyard and asks her deceased mother whether she is proud of her. She always feels that her mother was not very proud of her. She didn't get the answer before she died. The little boy in the film has an ability to communicate with the dead and told her "Yes, she was really proud of you."

identity and his relationship with his deceased mother. Peter has kept his relationship with his deceased mother alive at another level in order to help his self-reconstruction within his life transitions (Nasim 2007).

> Peter: "I think I can let go. For example, I just threw a worn out blanket away today. The reason I kept it for a while is that my mum amended the edges of the blanket. I didn't want to throw it away. But I realized I have to let go something.

In contrast to his close relationship with his mother, Peter had only a brief (fourth) story about a Rolex that used to belong to his deceased father reflecting his past relational dimension of the self. His strong symbolic and emotional meanings of his mother's possessions and their close mother-son relationship contrast his "non-existent" and distant relationship with his father. Peter had a detached relationship (his resentful self) with his father who passed away 5 years ago. Peter actually is quite resentful towards his father and said that his father did not contribute much to the family as much as his mother did. When his father passed away 5 years ago, Peter only kept one item, his father's Rolex watch as a reminder (memories of their past relationship). Although this watch is important to Peter, he did not have that much emotion involved in this possession. Peter kept the watch as a memento that linked him to his past-extended self of his affiliated relational self as a son to his father.

> Peter: "He himself didn't leave anything to me. The only item I have that belongs to him is this watch. This is the only item. There is a value in this watch. There is nothing that is worth keeping. I am not talking about the value of the watch. I am talking about the person."

Apart from possession stories that are linked to his disconnected relationships, Peter has other stories that are related to his existing relationships with his wife and close friends reflecting on his current relational dimension of the self. Peter shared his fifth story about two Swatch watches that signified his loving relationship with his wife, Danni. Peter is a Swatch fan. This story involves two Swatch watches. The first Swatch was a surprise gift that Peter *gave* to

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Danni on their anniversary (i.e. the *extended possession*). Peter shared a story about how he prepared the gift for Danni. As Pierce et al. (2003)'s suggested, one of the factors that individuals develop ownership feelings towards an object is through investing themselves (e.g. their time, money or effort) into the object. In Peter's case, he invested his effort and sacrificed his time and money to plan and to present the surprise gift *"I used a piece of our wedding ceremony program to write few sentences attached to the present"* to Danni (Sherry 1983, Belk and Coon 1993). Peter used a tangible object to deliver an intangible important message of love. The watch consists of symbolic and emotional meanings of affection to Danni. This gift-giving served a strengthening relational purpose in their relationship (Ruth et al. 1999).

> Peter: *"It was an anniversary present. I didn't expect her to have such a huge reaction. I remember we went to a shop and saw this one and said this one was quite nice. She didn't know I would buy it for her. I bought it and put it on the table before I went to work coz she came home before me. When she came home and found the present on the table, she was really happy. I didn't expect her to be that happy... I used a piece of our wedding ceremony program to write few sentences attached to the present."*

The second Swatch was a gift Peter received from Danni. Although Belk and Coon (1993) suggested that romantic, "agapic love", couples in gift-giving are different from the reciprocal exchange, both Peter and Danni wanted to give each other surprises to enhance and cultivate their relationship. Romantic couples influence each other's consumption style as they gradually share or fuse their interests. It is their "consumption style" (Holt 1997, Holt 1998) of how they consumed, experienced and collected Swatch watches that built and shaped their identities as a couple. The Swatch watches not only marked their romantic history in the past (the past relational self), and represents the present moment of their shared attachment towards Swatch watches (the present relational self), but also symbolize their promising future together (the future relational self) (Schultz et al. 1989).

> *Peter: "It was my birthday last year. I wanted to buy a Swatch. I went to the shop several times and thought maybe the watch didn't suit me well. We don't earn that much, you know. So I didn't buy it... When I went home, I noticed that she bought that Swatch for me. I was quite surprised."*

In addition, Peter has a group of friends from church that he values. His sixth possession story that is linked to the friendship with them reveals Peter's affiliated relational self. Peter received as a gift of a Swatch from his church friends (the cell group). This group of friends are very close to Peter and are viewed as part of Peter's definition of the self. Peter enjoyed being with them and often sought their advice. The gift signified his birthday celebration of his adulthood with his close friends whom he has known for many years. This gift had an affirming relational effect that Peter and his friends wanted to maintain and cultivate their friendship (Ruth et al. 1999). This watch not only has the culturally shared meanings of a popular branded watch at that time, but also contained Peter and his friends' shared meanings to reproduce their friendship intimacy (Montgomery 1988). Although the watch has lost its functions, Peter still wanted to keep it because of the symbolic and emotional meanings behind the watch (Richins 1994a, Belk 1988).

> *Peter: "It was ten or twenty years ago. That was the first time I got to know this brand (Swatch)... It was the time they (church cell group) celebrated my birthday at a pub so much fun. We were just about the right age to be allowed to go to pubs. We have known one another for many years...in church... since we were little. We went to Sunday schools, fellowships, then formed a cell group. It is a memorable watch...I still have it though it doesn't work any more."*

Apart from stories that are linked to his significant others, Peter also has other possession stories that symbolise his individualistic personal self-contrasting his past personal self with his present personal self in terms of his freedom and financial stability in life. Peter's seventh story about his collection of Swatch watches not only expressed his passion in collecting Swatch watches, but also reminded him of his past successful self with a pleasant life style and a relatively stable high income job, and symbolised his present unsuccessful self with a

tight budget lifestyle with an unstable income. Collecting Swatch watches helped Peter express his creativity (Belk 1995). Peter enjoys collecting watches and was a serious Swatch collector. He estimates he has around eighty Swatch watches. The focus and commitment of collecting is very similar to "romantic love with its features of self-transcendence and mystic rituals" (Belk 1995: 148). As Bianchi (2002) noted, "what drives collecting is, simply, that it is a pleasurable activity. It strips off all the routinised, utilitarian, and compulsory elements of consumption and transforms it into a pure pleasure-seeking activity." (p. 427). Peter used to collect Swatch watches when he earned high disposable income. However, since Hong Kong went into recession in 1997, he was laid off. The situation has been tough for him to find a job due to the fact that he is not a well-educated engineer. At the same time, Peter has a mortgage to pay. Moreover, he has not received a regular salary lately and is short of money. He has no choice but to give up his hobby. In retelling his glorious time in the past by narrating how he collected his precious watches, he relived that particular moment of life and re-evaluate his current situation with a sense of sadness.

> Peter: "I bought so many Swatches. I don't know the total number of Swatch I have…
> about 80 I think. I used to buy at least one per season when I earned good money. In
> the past few years, I didn't buy any coz I just don't have any money… Now I need to
> give up this hobby."

Peter's Swatch watches not only remind him of his pleasant life style but also signify some of his unforgettable memories in the past. He narrated his eight story about a Galaxy Swatch that is related to his pleasant memories of his first time experience of travelling by plane and his long holidays in Canada that he believed he would not have any chance to have it any more in the future due to his current financial difficulties. Peter described how he first time travelled by aeroplane to visit his friend in Canada. This story revealed his carefree and young past personal self. He was not married and had some savings after working for several years. Peter narrated his story of his unforgettable memories of travelling in Canada in the

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past with bittersweet emotions at present (Belk et al. 1989). With his current situation (an unstable job, a mortgage and his wife's health problem), Peter is no longer a carefree young man (his past personal self) but has to be a responsible married man (his present personal self) to take care of the family and his wife.

> *Peter: "The trip in Canada was really pleasant... the first time I travelled by plane. I don't think I will have such a long holiday any more in the future... Almost a month. I didn't have that much money to travel the whole Canada. But we had a good time there... shopping, listening to music, hanging around."*

Possessions not only consist of symbolic and emotional meanings, but also contain utilitarian and instrumental meanings (Richins 1994b, Dittmar 1989). Watches serve different purposes and have different meanings for Peter. For Peter, watches serve another purpose at work, the utilitarian value. Peter differentiates his collectable Swatch watches from ordinary watches for matching clothes and utilitarian purposes. His final story about his important possessions, Casio watches, signify his personal self at work. His collectable Swatch watches are so sacred to him that he only collected and exhibited them at home. They are not meant to be worn. Due to his nature of his job working in construction sites, Peter does not want to wear any watches that are memorable nor too expensive to get scratched. Different watches signify Peter's different images (Sirgy 1982). His Swatch collection is colourful, funky, plastic, and relatively more expensive and creative compared to his Casio work watches that are more robust, relatively cheaper and stainless steel. Peter bought two Casio watches as self-gifts on his birthday. The first Casio watches is congruent with his self-image at work on construction sites as *"rough"* that represents his personal self at work and the other one matches his casual style at leisure (Sirgy 1982). The Casio watches not only have symbolic meanings for his self-image, but also serve the utilitarian purpose of checking time and usage in a rough construction site environment.

Peter: "I always wanted to have a watch for me to go to work in a construction site on a regular basis. I went to buy Casio watch on my birthday. I bought a cheap one which was only HKD 200. Then I found another one in the same shop. I though it would be such a waste to use that in the site. But it would be nice to match my clothing when I go out. They style is much better and the price is about HKD 400 something.... Yes. The HKD 200 one is worth it. I don't feel sad if the watch get scratches. I used it quite roughly at work."

To summarize, Peter's important possession stories revolve around his disconnected relationships with his deceased parents, his existing relationships with his wife and his close friends reflecting on his past and present relational dimension of self. In the light of his personal dimension of the self, Peter recounted stories contrasting his past successful carefree personal dimension of the self with his current unsuccessful self in his work. His predominant possession themes in his stories are mainly related to his grief towards his mother. Peter seemed to contrast his past self with the present self back and forth in his narratives grieving the loss of his mother. In terms of Peter's self-possession boundaries, Peter not only regarded self-gifts, gift-receipts and object objects as his important possessions but also a gift of a Swatch watch that he had *given* to Danni as one of his important possessions (i.e. the *extended possession*). Peter's self-definition includes his parents, his wife and his friends from church (Markus and Kitayama 1991). No story linking to his collective dimension of the self was revealed in Peter's stories. As a result, there is no overlapping in Peter's personal self. As Figure 4.6 shows, Peter's personal self is largely overlapped by incorporating his parents, wife and friends within his self. His pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration.

Relational Self:

A knitted sweater from his mother

Relational Self:

A blanket

Relational Self:

A gift of Swatch watch from his close church friend

Peter's Personal Self

- His collection of Swatch
- His Swatch Galaxy watch
- His Casio at work

Relational Self:

A film called A Sixth Sense

Collective Self:

Relational Self:

*Swatch watches for Danni

Relational Self:

His deceased father's Rolex watch
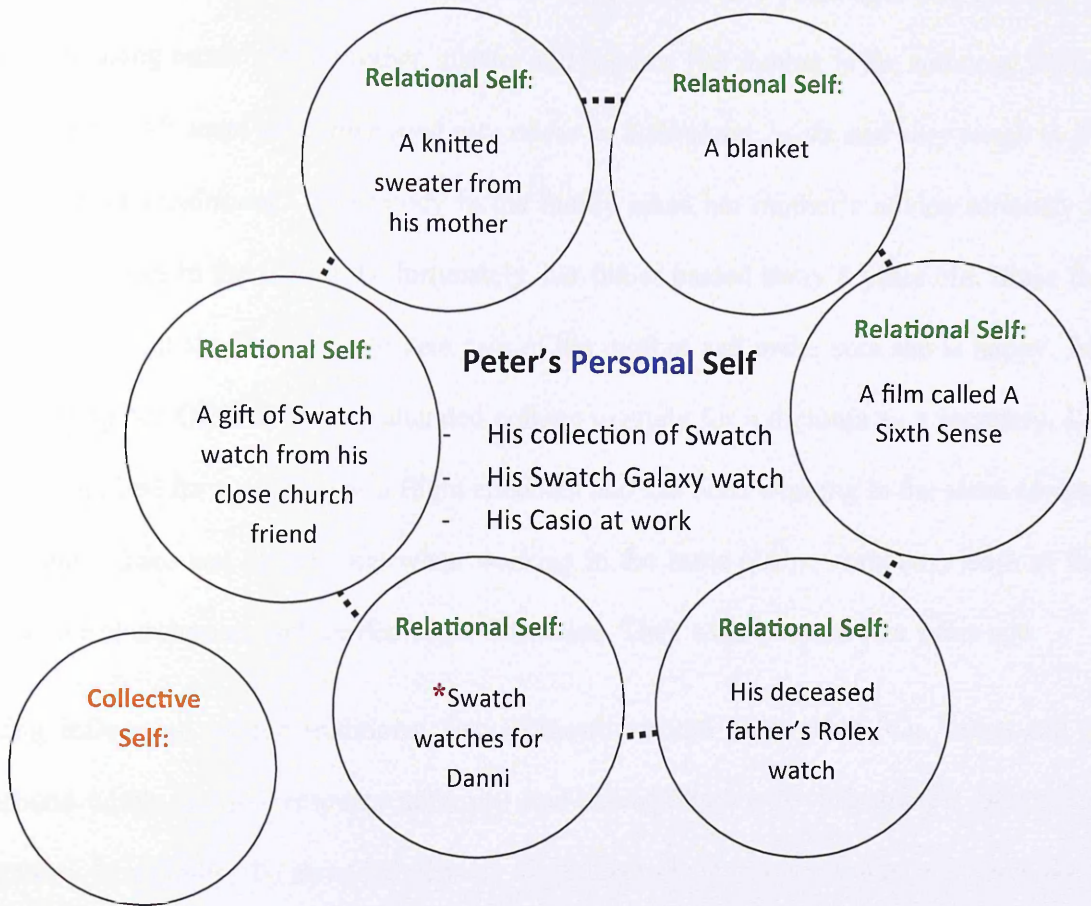
Figure 4.6: Peter's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

*= Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their possessions

4.3.5 Shirley

4.3.5.1 Shirley's Life Narrative

Shirley is a 34-year-old flight attendant who married Jake five years ago. She grew up in a public housing estate with a brother, a sister and parents. Her mother is the authority figure in the family. *"My mum says something nice about us behind our backs and very tough in front of us… very traditional"*. Everybody in the family takes her mother's advice seriously and obeys her rules in the family. Unfortunately, her father passed away 8 years old. Since then, Shirley felt that she is obliged to take care of her mother and make sure she is happy. After completing her GCSEs, Shirley attended college to study for a diploma as a secretary. Later on, she applied for a position as a flight attendant and has been working in the same company ever since. Jake and Shirley met when working in the same airline company. Both of them are active churchgoers and are dedicated Christians. They were married five years ago.

Being influenced by the traditional five Chinese cardinal hierarchies (e.g. father-son and husband-wife), Shirley respects authority and is submissive to hierarchies. She prefers harmony in a family. To show her respect, she tends to listen to her mother's advice. By the same token, Shirley enjoys seeking advice from Jake, as she believes Jake has better ideas, solutions and advice for her. She listens and follows him. Shirley is content with her stable life and thankful for what she has. She did not believe that she would need to prove herself by achieving a university degree. In contrast, she just wanted to do something that she enjoys.

4.3.5.2 Analysis of Shirley's Stories about Her Important Possessions: the Relationally-led Self-Configuration

The things Shirley regarded as important possessions are related to two dimensions of the self. The first involves her personal dimension of the self at work, the second her relational dimension of the self associated with her relationships with her sister, her mother and her husband. There is no story relating to her collective dimension of the self. In other words, Shirley's pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration. As Table 4.8 shows, Shirley placed emphasis on stories about important possessions reflecting her identities as a little sister and being loved by her elder sister, a daughter showing filial piety to her mother and a wife being loved and cared by her husband Jake. "Being cared" and "caring for others", reflecting the relational dimension of the self, are the main themes in Shirley's overall narratives.

In terms of self-possession boundary, Shirley regarded self-gifts (e.g. her Titus watch and her Swatch watch) and gifts that she had received from her husband (an engagement ring and a diamond cross pendant) and sister (a birthday watch) to be her important possessions. In addition, Shirley considered a gift of a Rolex watch that she had *given* to her mother (an *extended possession*) as one of her important possessions. In other words, this Rolex watch does not belong to Shirley physically, but she has developed some kind of psychological ownership of the watch because of her close relationship with her mother suggesting she might have a broader interpretation of what constitute her sense of self and her possessions.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Shirley's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Achievement	A Titus watch
	Utilitarian	Swatch watches
Relational Self	Enhancing & Strengthening relationships	1) Swatch watches
		2) An engagement ring from Jake
		3) A gift of a diamond pendant from Jake
	Affirming relationship	1) A gift of a birthday watch from her sister
		2) A gift of a Rolex for her mother
	Memories of the past with specific person(s)	1) Swatch watches
		2) An engagement ring from Jake
		3) A gift of a diamond pendant from Jake
		4) A gift of a birthday watch from her sister
		5) A gift of a Rolex for her mother
Collective Self	-	-

Table 4.8: Shirley's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Shirley began her first important possession story with a Titus watch that she only wears at work as a flight attendant representing her current personal self at work. In addition, this watch marks her personal history of earning her first salary, her rite of passage representing her past personal self. After completing her GCSEs, she was looking for a summer job to earn some pocket money. It was not easy for summer job seekers to find a full time job. After several attempts, she was offered a job as a clerk in a company with a decent salary. The watch is meaningful for her because it reminds her that *"the money was quite hard to earn at the time"*. Shirley *"worked hard"* to get her first salary. To celebrate her first salary, she bought a Titus watch to reward herself as she deserved this self-gift after all this hard work (Mick and Demoss 1990a). Shirley has been wearing the watch at work ever since to remind herself to work hard.

Shirley: "The first one is Titus. It is my first summer job that I gained my first salary and bought it. The one with "Everlasting Love" engraved at the back of the watch. I remember I bought it in 1991. I still use it. I have been wearing it for 14 years... It was HKD 700 (£47) something 14 years ago... I tried really hard to find summer jobs at that time. Mum told me to give up coz nobody would like to hire summer job

In addition, Shirley believes that the style of the watch matches the style and image of her uniform as a flight attendant, *"conservative"* (her professional image at work). The watch represents her personal self at work. According to Sirgy's (1982) self-congruent theory, Shirley chose to wear this watch to match her image at work as a *"proper, elegant and conservative"* flight attendant. Furthermore, Shirley is proud that the watch was bought by herself as a gift to herself (self-gift) to fulfil her ideal self of independence. This Titus "Everlasting Love" watches were popular in Hong Kong at that time. Boyfriends would buy these watches to show their affection to girlfriends. In Shirley's case, she bought the watch by herself to celebrate her achievement and to signify her independence.

> *Shirley: "It was very funny. Once I worked in the Business Class. In the same week, three men asked me about my story behind the watch and told me that they bought the same for their girlfriends. I told them that I bought it myself. I found this very interesting and think... does it have to be that way? I always remember it. The watch is so reliable and durable. I have only changed the battery and straps... Only when I go to work, I can't wear too fashionable watches at work. Something a bit more proper, elegant, conservative... to match the image of the uniform. Some colleagues wear some big watches. I don't think it suits the image of our uniform. That's not very nice. When I look at the watch, it reminds me the money that was quite hard to earn at the time."*

In addition, Shirley reflected on her relational dimension of the self in terms of her relationship and affection for her sister, Jenny in her second possession story about an unbranded watch that Shirley received from Jenny. This watch symbolized Shirley's close relationship with Jenny, her affirming relationship with her sister, Jenny (Ruth et al. 1996). Shirley is very close to her. The age gap between is so small that they played, cried and fought for toys or clothes when they were young. Shirley received a watch from Jenny as a birthday gift almost 10 years ago. It was the first time that Jenny had left Hong Kong and

lived in another place for a long time. When Jenny was not around, Shirley missed being with her and seeking advice from her greatly. Jenny sent a funny watch to Shirley as her birthday present during the time she was in the US. This watch signified the importance of their sister-relationship. Shirley values the watch as much as she values the relationship with her sister. She has worn the watch for almost ten years.

> Shirley: "Another one (watch)... my sister sent it to me from the US. She and I are very close... sometimes quite competitive... like I decided to become a flight attendant and she immediately did the same. Anyway, I missed her when she was not around. My sister was there with her husband for more than a year. She sent the watch to me as my birthday present. Every time people look at my watch will ask the same question... coz nobody understands how the time is read from the watch. I like it very very much and have been wearing it for many years... almost ten years."

Furthermore, Shirley showed her filial piety and respect to her mother in her third possession story. Shirley narrated a story about their trip in Switzerland and she regarded the gift of a Rolex for her mother as one of her important possessions although the watch belongs to her mother. Children are taught at an early age how to respect their parents and how it is their duty to support them when they are old (Yau 1988). In Shirley's narrative, pleasing her mother and caring for her by buying her expensive Rolex watch was one of the ways to show her filial piety. Shirley showed her filial piety and respect by spending a holiday with her mother, paying for her holiday trip and buying her a Rolex watch because *"I know she loves Rolex. Mum was really happy"*. Shirley and her mother are very close. This close relationship leads Shirley to develop a sense of psychological ownership towards the Rolex watch as Shirley spent time with her mother and invested money in buying the watch for her (Pierce et al. 2003).

> Shirley: "I bought a Rolex for my mum when travelling in Switzerland. At that time, I was not dating anybody. I travelled quite often with her in the past and paid for her trip. We were in a tour in Switzerland visiting a Rolex factory. . People were crazy to buy Rolex there. I know she loves Rolex. I bought one for her there. Mum was really happy. Under the influence of the atmosphere there (in the factory), "this one is good and that one is good as well." (Note: she was imitating the way other tourists spoke in

Apart from her relationships with her sister and mother, Shirley spent a lengthy time describing the importance of her husband, Jake in her life. She narrated three possession stories that symbolized her past and present affiliated relational self of the relationship with her husband in a temporal sequence from their history of dating (e.g. Swatch watches), to their wedding engagement (e.g. Shirley's engagement ring) and building up their history together as a couple (e.g. a diamond cross pedant) marking their milestones in their lives. These possessions signify how they strengthened and cultivated their relationship on a temporal continuum.

Shirley continued narrating her fourth possession story about Swatch watches. Shirley and Jake met eight years ago when both of them were working in the same airline company. Jake met her on the plane while she was working. They dated for about three years and were married 5 years ago. These Swatch watches signified the beginning of their relationship. They were in the stage of enhancing and strengthening their relationship (Ruth et al. 1999) and wanted to have something together as a sign of togetherness and connectedness. They both chose the Swatch watches together. In addition, Shirley has different watches to match her various images. She would wear Swatch to accommodate her sports self either doing exercise or wearing something sporty.

Shirley: "This one is the one I bought together with Jake. I wanted to buy one. Then Jake suggested that why don't we both have the same. The style of the watch is

relatively neutral... We were dating. I always listen to him and take his advice. I thought he had a point. The style suits both of us. And the size fits our wrists so we bought them. When I wear something elegant, I will wear K.M. (a fashionable watch). When I do exercise or wear something that is sportive, I will wear Swatch. "

From dating to marriage proposal, Shirley and Jake got engaged in 2001. Shirley gave a detailed description of how Jake gave her an unforgettable proposal in her fifth possession story. Jake proposed in a traditional way with a bunch of flowers, a diamond ring and a surprise dinner. Shirley personally does not particularly like diamond rings. She has bought one for herself in the past. But she emphasized that this ring is different from any other ring. It is her engagement ring with a heart-shape diamond on it. It is a sign of Jake's promise and love for her signifying their relationship has entered another stage. Shirley cherishes it a lot, so she does not wear it every day. She only wears it when attending *"somebody's wedding"* to signify her marital status. Shirley wore her engagement ring to indicate that she had been engaged in the past and was now married, and working on building a solid foundation for her relationship with her husband (Kleine and Bake 2004). Shirley's engagement ring is "a hallmark of close intimate relationship" (Ruth et al. 1999).

Shirley: "I am not a big fan of diamond rings. The size of the diamond is not important to me coz I don't like it too big. The big diamonds don't suit my image. The way I dress... don't match. I like the one I got from Jake... small and a heart shape... because it is meaningful and I like the heart shape diamond. I bought a diamond ring for myself before Jake. But when I go out, I wear Jake's diamond ring not mine. I like that one. But I don't wear it every day. Only when I attend to somebody's weddings. Maybe some people think it is too small. But I don't care. I believe everybody can afford to buy they like. It's just people have different value. It is not what I can afford, it is whether you want to spend that money or not. I like it (the ring). It makes me happy. It is meaningful and beautiful. "

Possession meanings are often interwoven with the original meanings as well as extra layers of idiosyncratic meanings through interactions (e.g. wearing or using it). Shirley also has a final possession story that is linked to a special experience that she shared with Jake. Shirley received a diamond pendant cross from Jake on her baptism before they were married. It has

a symbolic meaning that now she is Christian (her spiritual religious self) with a cross around her neck. In addition to the original symbolic meaning of the necklace, there were additional lived experiences associated with the pendant because she accidentally dropped the pendant down the sink. The experience taught her that it is always better to solve problems together rather than alone and she appreciated Jake's support and help. The pendant cross carries not only the original culturally shared meaning of celebrating her baptism, but also an additional idiosyncratic experientially-derived meaning that they will always share (Ruth et al. 1999). The symbolic and emotional meanings and values of the possession were enhanced through interactions (Richins 1994b).

> Shirley: "Jake gave it to me on my baptism... the day to celebrate that I became Christian. Did Jake tell you this story? I dropped in the sink and took me the whole night to fetch it... I always took the necklace off when taking a shower coz I was worried the colour of the necklace might fade away. Now when I think about it, it is still quite sad coz it took me the whole night and I felt really down. I just wrapped up my body with a towel and used a stick to fetch the pendant. I was just about to take a shower. I did not want to wake up Jake and thought he could not help me. I thought of all kinds of methods to get it out. I thought men are careless. Maybe when he helped, he might push it to some other directions. It worsened the situation. How wrong and silly I was?! At the end, we had to solve the problem together and got the pendant out of the tube of drain of the sink. Jake did it with some "Blue tap"... I wouldn't get it out by myself. It was him who did it for me. That was an experience that we learned... to try to solve problems together."

To summarize, Shirley's important possession stories reveal her stable self-development (Thompson 1997) in terms of her close relationships with her sister, mother and husband. Apart from her stories that are linked to her significant others (her sister, her mother and her husband), she has a watch that marked her achievement in the past and differentiated her image at work as a flight attendant from other images (e.g. when she exercises) of her by wearing different watches signifying her personal dimension of the self. Her relational dimension of the self is dominant in her possession stories. Her predominant possession stories are related to themes of "being cared for" and "caring for her mother". Almost all of her important possession stories are related to her past and current affiliated relational self. In

contrast, there was few stories that are related to the personal dimension of her self and no story revealing the collective dimension of her self. In other words, her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration.

Her sister, her mother and her husband play important parts in Shirley's life and her self-definition. As Figure 4.7 shows, Shirley's personal self is largely overlapped by incorporating her sister, her mother and her husband within her self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). There was no story linking to her collective dimension of the self, resulting in no overlapping in Shirley's personal self. Shirley's identities as a flight attendant at work, a sister to Jenny, a daughter to her mother and a wife to Jake help her to define who she is. In terms of Shirley's self-possession boundary, she not only considered a gift she bought for herself (self-gift) and gifts that she received from her sister and husband as her important possession, but also regarded a gift of a Rolex watch she bought for her mother as one of her possessions (i.e. the *extended possession*).
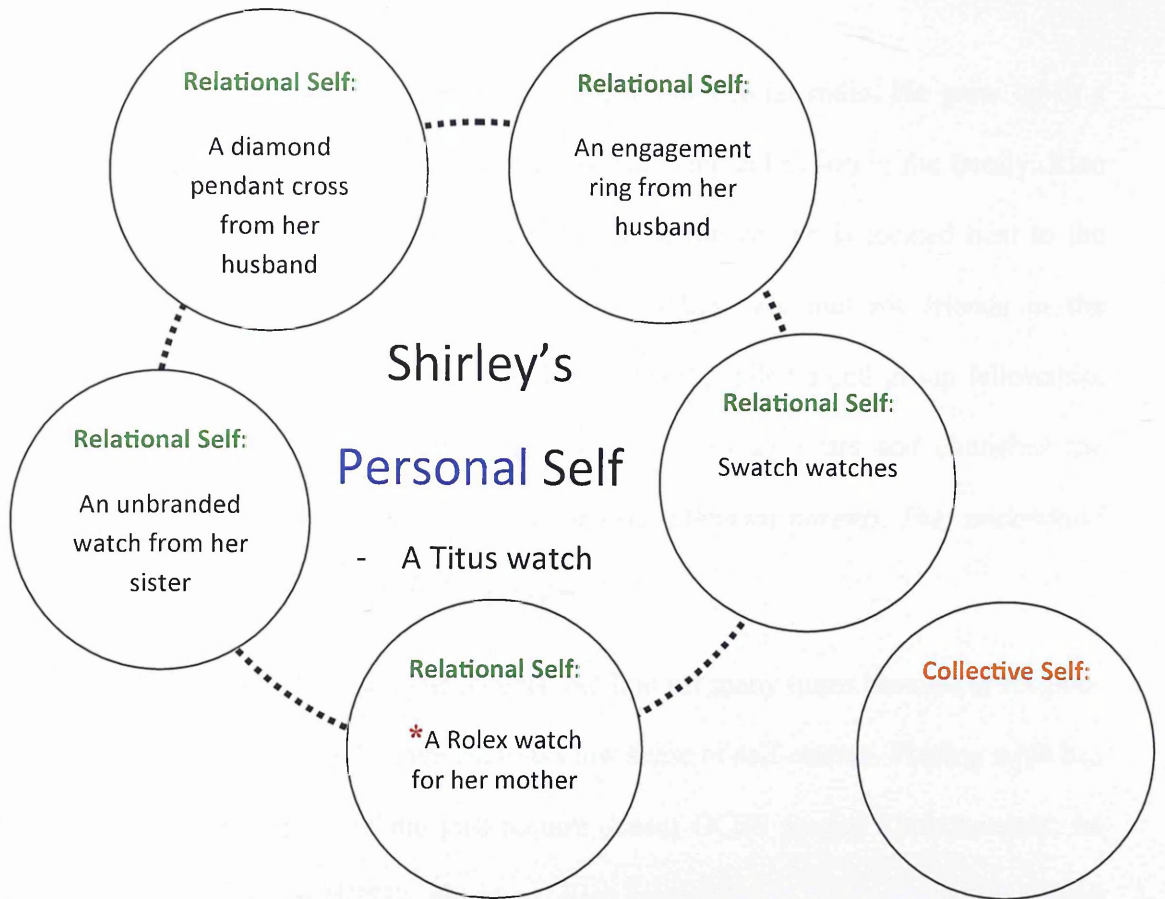
Figure 4.7: Shirley's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

*= Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their possessions

4.3.6 Rico

4.3.6.1 Rico's Life Narrative

Rico is a 34-year-old traffic news reporter for a local commercial radio. He grew up in a public housing estate with two brothers and parents. He is the eldest son in the family. Rico went to a Christian church when he was a child because the church is located next to the public housing and offered different activities for children. He met his friends in the children's fellowship and later they formed a close network, called a cell group fellowship. Rico has known people from the cell group for more than 27 years and cherishes the friendship with them. . *"I think friends are more important than my parents. They understand me. I really cherish my friendship with this group."*

Rico was never very good at school. His parents told him off many times because of his poor academic performance. That might have led to his low sense of self-esteem. Finding a job has not been easy for him as most of the jobs require decent GCSE grades. Unfortunately, he failed most of his subjects of GCSEs. However, Rico knew that his talent was not in school academic subjects but in singing and sports. He found his confidence in singing and always had a dream to become a singer or something related to the music and entertainment industry. His previous job was also related to this industry, i.e. an animation production company for movies. With his current job as a traffic news reporter for a local commercial radio, he believed it is one step closer to his dream. Now he wishes that one day he could become a DJ in Hong Kong.

4.3.6.2 Analysis of Rico's Stories about His Important Possessions: the Personal-Relational Equilibrium Self-Configuration

As Table 4.9 shows, Rico's important possession stories revolve firstly around his deceased uncle, mother and close friends illustrating his relational dimension of the self, and secondly around his personal history and achievement reflecting on the personal dimension of his self. There is no story linking to his collective dimension of the self. His pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personal-relational equilibrium self-configuration.

In terms of the self-possession boundary, Rico regarded self-gifts (e.g. a Seiko watch and a Senate watch), gifts that he received from close others (e.g. a "limited edition teeth marked" watch and a Casio watch) and other objects (e.g. a writing mat, a singing contest video tape and a photo with his church friends) as his important possessions.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Rico's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Achievement	1) A writing mat
		2) A singing contest video tape
	Personal history	1) A writing mat
		2) A Seiko watch
		3) A Senate watch
	Self-expression	A singing contest video tape
Relational Self	Affirming familial and friendship relationships	1) A "limited edition teeth-marked" watch
		2) A Casio G-shock watch
		3) A photo with church friends
	Memories of the past with specific person (s)	1) A "limited edition teeth-marked" watch
		2) A Casio G-shock watch
		3) A photo with church friends
		4) A Senate watch
Collective Self	-	-

Table 4.9: Rico's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Rico began his first story about a "limited edition teeth-marked" watch that was given to him by his fifth uncle more than 30 years ago. Unfortunately, his uncle passed away some time ago. This fifth uncle acted as a fatherly figure for him in his childhood providing many

wonderful childhood memories in Rico's life. Interestingly, this important possession is an intangible object, "a limited edition teeth-marked watch" that was created and given by his deceased fifth uncle when he was a child. This story is about his disconnected relationship with his deceased uncle and reveals Rico's past relational dimension of the self. Consistent with Eckhardt and Houston's findings (2001), Rico regarded this intangible object as one of his important possessions providing him with unforgettable memories of the past with his uncle (Kleine et al. 1995, Belk 1988, Schultz et al. 1989). This "watch" provided many happy memories from Rico's childhood. Rico described his deceased fifth uncle as a funny man who loved spending time with children, i.e. taking them out to the countryside, a car ride or seeing movies. Rico's parents were busy working when he was little and they did not have much time to play with him and his brothers. The fifth uncle had more time for them. His happy childhood was mainly based on his time with his uncle. His fifth uncle always made a bite mark on Rico's hand and called it as "a limited edition teeth-marked watch" because the bite mark would fade away and the "watch" would disappear. This "watch" provided wonderful childhood memories and bittersweet emotions in the present (Belk et al. 1989) as the relationship between him and his uncle is disconnected due to death. Rico missed him and the "watch" reminds Rico of his uncle and of the time they had together (his childhood self in the past).

> Rico: "The first watch I received was not from my parents. It's from my fifth uncle. He was an active and cheerful guy who loves travelling. When I was little, he was the one who always played with us. I still remembered he always bit my arm and used his teeth to make a "watch" on my hand. Then he called it "a limited edition watch from the fifth uncle". I had a lot of fun with him. He took us to have a car ride, to TV station to see pop stars, to see superman movie at mid-night... we went to his place overnight sometimes. He died 10 years ago from cancer... the only thing that reminds me of him is his limited edition "watch"... the happiest time I had was with him in my childhood."

Rico continued narrating his second possession story (a Casio G-shock watch), which reveals an improving relationship between Rico and his mother. Although Rico did not like the watch

because it did not fit his image, Rico cherished the watch because it signifies a special relationship with his close loved one. The story of a gift of a watch received from his mother triggered Rico to re-evaluate his current relationship with her contrasting the past "no-communication" relationship with the present caring one. This story of his Casio G-shock watch served to have an affirming relational effect as maintaining and reproducing familial intimacy (Ruth et al. 1999) and revealed his relational self in a mother and son relationship. This watch evoked his webs of personal memories (Belk 1991a) and linked his distant relationship with his mother in the past and his close bonding and improved relationship with her in the present. Because the family was quite poor when Rico was a child, both parents worked really hard to keep up with the family expenses and did not have time to be with them. Rico's relationship with his mother in the past was very distant. *"We didn't communicate often... we can stay at home for the whole day without talking to each other... always argued in the past".* However, as both Rico and his mother's selves are changing, the relationship gradually changed for the better. Both of them are willing to put their past broken relationship behind them, concentrate on their present caring relationship and look forward to strengthening this special relationship in the future (Kleine et al. 1995). They spent more time talking to one another as Rico says, *"Never thought our relationship would be this nice".*

> *Rico: "This watch (Casio G-shock) was such a big hit in the 90s. It was quite expensive as well. But I had no interest in buying one myself. I guess it didn't fit my image. I am not a sporty guy. Anyway, one day mum all of the sudden gave me a G-shock. I was really surprised and said "Where is it from? Did you buy it?" She said she found it under the chair on the bus. Mum always has some kind of luck finding things on a bus, ferry, minibus or taxi. She is already 60 something but she looks like 40 only. I quite admire her. She has been working hard for the family... she is still not retired. She takes up some freelance at home making clothes for people... I guess she enjoys working. My relationship with mum was not that good in the past. I guess we are both very independent and opinionated. We didn't communicate often... we can stay at home for the whole day without talking to each other... always argued in the past, but as we both get older, we have better communication now. When I am upset with something, I talk to her. Sometimes we even go downstairs in the park to talk for an hour or two. Never thought our relationship would be this nice."*

Not only are his family members very dear to Rico, he also regarded his close friends from church playing a significant part in his life and helping him to go through different life stages. His third story about a photo with his church friend symbolizes his social ties and memories of their history. Rico has known his church friends for more than 27 years. The photo was taken 15 years ago at a farewell party for one of the members who was emigrating to Canada. Rico valued the photo as "*priceless*" and cherished the friendship with the group, as they are "*more important than my parents*". Due to the cramped space in Hong Kong public housing apartments, Rico does not have his own bedroom. He only has a shared bunk bed and a small desk that he can claim as his. Rico wanted to emphasize the significance of these friendships by displaying this photo on his desk, the most prominent place in his own space, as part of his important extended self (Belk 1988).

> *Rico: "I grew in a church. The church was located next to our public estate. I met a group of friend then soon we formed a cell group in church. We gathered together to read the Bible, to chat, to play some card or board games. We were about 10 people. This group photo was taken 15 years ago… then some of them left and immigrated to Canada… I don't know when we will meet again as a whole group. We made nine key chains using the spiritual fruits from the Bible. That night, we had a gathering to farewell one of the members and every one had one key chain. Then we took a photo together with the key chains of nine spiritual fruits. I still have the photo and put it on my desk. For me, this photo is valuable… priceless. I think friends are more important than my parents. They understand me. I really cherish my friendship with this group."*

Rico continued describing his special friendship with this group of friends by narrating his fourth story about a Senate watch that not only revealed his affiliated relational dimension of the self but also his personal dimension of the self. The watch symbolized his personal history because it was the first time that Rico had travelled by plane (Richins 1994a, Dittmar 1992). He had saved up money for quite a while in order to achieve his dream of travelling to Europe. In addition, it was the first and the only time he travelled and saw Europe, including Finland, Sweden, England and France. It was an eye-opening experience for him since he had never seen any other countries except China before this trip. Rico was glad that he got a

chance to do this once in a lifetime trip. The watch is a self-gift that Rico bought for himself

while he was travelling with his cell group (a group of close church friends) in France.

Furthermore, this watch not only links him to the memories of his unforgettable experience

but also signifies his close social ties with the same church friends whom he had known for

more many years. *"I was glad that I spent my holidays with the cell group. It is not easy to*

have a chance to do this" This group of friends are like his brothers and sisters helping him

through difficulties in different life stages. Rico shares his problems and worries with them

and they constantly meet up to support one another. *"I hope we can keep up this*

relationship".

> Rico: *"It was July 1998. Because of my good friend's wedding in Finland, it was the*
> *first time I went to Europe. The whole cell group travelled to Finland, Sweden,*
> *London and France. It was the first time I had a real picnic in the forest in Finland...*
> *experienced the real Finnish smoked sauna. Then we took a cruise to Stockholm...*
> *houses are beautiful... red bricks... there they had really beautiful and expensive*
> *silverware. We left Finland for London... we went to see the musical "Les*
> *Miserables". I don't like the weather in London... just like women... unpredictable...*
> *it was sunny... after 5 minutes... it rained. We also went to France by Euro Star... we*
> *spent 10 days there... walked up to the Eiffel Tower...Disney... Avenue des Champs*
> *Elysees... there I bought a watch that has a brand "Senate" on the front case as a*
> *souvenir... it was not cheap. I was glad that I spent my holidays with the cell group...*
> *it is not easy to have a chance to do this. We have known each other for more than 27*
> *years. We meet at church on Sunday and afterwards gather at one's of the member's*
> *home... chatting, playing Mah-jong[11]. We share our problems and worries. I cherish*
> *my friendship with the cell group. I hope we can keep this relationship."*

Apart from possession stories that reflected the relational dimension of his self, Rico also has

other stories that revealed his individualistic personal dimension of the self. Rico continued

narrating his fifth story about a Seiko watch. This Seiko watch is very special for him not

because of marking his achievement in life. In contrast, it recorded the lowest moment in his

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[11] Mah-jong is a traditional Chinese game played by four players and is viewed as one of the typical Chinese activities and social gatherings. It is a popular gambling game for Chinese to play in their spare time. Mah-jong is played in different social settings, i.e. wedding banquets, birthday parties, traditional Chinese celebrations, festivals, family gatherings or Mah-jong game centres. This game normally is played by four players who are friends or relatives and they exchange news about their daily lives during the game.

life, his personal history (Richins 1994a, Dittmar 1992). Rico went on narrating how he came to a conclusion to buy a watch and to choose a brand between Citizen or Seiko. At the end, he chose Seiko because it fit his then-life status matching with a local Chinese expression *"If you are poor, you wear Seiko"*. This watch not only has the culturally shared meanings of a branded watch, but also contained the special idiosyncratic symbolic and emotional meanings of his past personal self, present personal self or a future personal self (Kleine et al. 1995).

The watch represented the lowest point in Rico's life. Rico was just about to lose his job and was in serious debt. During that year, he lost his sense of direction in life (his lost self). Rico tried to explore different options by doing different kinds of jobs ranging from a freelance animation controller to a sales assistant at a gambling centre. In the end, he was employed by a local commercial radio to report the traffic news. For him, it was one step closer to his dream as a singer (his desired performing self) since he was in more or less the same industry. While narrating his difficulties in the past, Rico was glad that he finally found a job he enjoyed and he can use his creativity and talent in his job. He is very content with what he has now. This watch is like a testimony about the life events and transitions in his life. Possessions are tangible objects that help people to retrieve their past selves that they wish to bring into the present selves.

> Rico: *"Few years ago... in 2003, I wanted to buy a watch... maybe because of the advertisement or other reasons... I am the only who always does not have any demand for watches. But I spent a thousand HK dollars to buy Seiko watch, a scuba diving watch. In Chinese, there is a rhyme saying "If you are really poor, you wear Seiko" "If you lost lots of money in gambling, you wear Citizen". I am never good at managing my finance. Haa... I guess I belong to the first category. That's why I wear Seiko. As I grow older, I changed. Two years ago, I was laid off by the company I worked for more than 10 years. The company had some kind of financial problem... many people left the place. I was quite lost at that time. I was working in the post-production department. The industry was pretty narrow. It was difficult finding a similar job... on and off I was taking up some freelance jobs. Then I got a job to work for Jockey Club but I though it was against my Christian belief. I don't gamble and don't wanna do anything related to it. I quitted. It took me a year to find my current job. Actually, I always like singing... drama... at that time I wanted to have my own*

record. Then... my friends who wanted to help out left me gradually. This year, I found this job. I quite like my job... reporting traffic news on radio... involving planning, operation, production, writing... it is all I wanted... suit me. This job is quite challenging and demanding. But I really like this job."

Rico considered himself as not so successful in many aspects of his life, for example, his love relationship, his job prospects, his financial management and his school performance. His academic self is his undesired self because he was never good at any school subjects *"... always was the bottom student in the class"*. Rico felt inferior and had low self-esteem when he went to school. His only passions were in music and sports. However, Rico was once awarded a prize of a writing mat in front of the whole school for his best grade in the integrated science subject. He was proud of narrating his sixth story about this writing mat as one of his important possessions that marked his one-time success in academic achievement revealing his past individualistic personal self *"it was quite encouraging to receive something like this."*

> Rico: "I am never good at academic subjects. I always got poor grades in school. In 1985, it was primary 5 assembly. The teacher on the stage called my name. I thought what kind of mistakes and crime I made again? Noop. It was a prize. I got the highest marks in integrated science. But I got only 79 marks. Maybe nobody was interested in the subject. The prize was a writing mat... it looks really ugly... old-fashion scenery (on the writing mat). But for me, it meant a lot... coz it was the first I got a prize in academic and also the last time. I never achieved anything in school and always was the bottom student in the class. It was quite encouraging to receive something like this. I can achieve something I thought I would never have a chance. Just believe that I could."

While his academic self is his undesired inferior self, his ability to sing is his desired self that he wishes he could pursue. Rico narrated his final story about a video tape that recorded his achievement in school singing context. This video tape signified his self-expression in singing (his desired performing self) and his achievement in the past revealing his individualistic personal self. Although Rico was not good at academic subjects in high school (his undesired self) *"I was not good at academic (subjects) and never achieved anything*

there", he still had good school memories because of his talent in music and sports (his desired self). This video tape not only reminded him of his personal achievements but also other people's recognition of his talent "*It was nice that people recognised my talent... I left some good memories for them.*" This video captured and recorded the best moment of his time (his past self) in high school in the past. It helped Rico to realize that what he wanted was to pursue his career path in a related industry (e.g. entertainment related industry) later in his life. Narrating between his achievement in the past (his past desired self) and his dream he wanted to achieve in the future (his possible self), he was glad that he had now found a job working for the radio station (his present self). Rico has a dream that one day he could become a DJ and is motivated achieve his goal.

> *Rico: "I had quite a lot of good memory in high school. I played Ping Pong and represented the school to join the inter-school Ping Pong competition. I won some prizes in an open group competition. I was not good at academic and never achieved anything there. When I was in Form 4 & 5, I joined the singing contest in school. Those years, I won different singing prizes. I joined different groups... I was once in a pair singing and sang off tune at the end. I was so down and upset with myself. During the break, some junior students came to talk to me not to give up. Then I did my solo singing very well after the break. It was nice that people recognised my talent... I left some good memories for them. The school recorded a 3-hour long video tape for us and all participants had a copy. I want to keep this it and watch it from time to time. It was good memory during that time in high school. Maybe I will give it to my son in the future."*

To summarize, Rico recounted stories reflecting on his personal history in different life stages and helping him project his goal as a DJ in the future. In addition, Rico's important possession stories revolves around his disconnected relationships with his deceased uncle, his existing improving relationship with his mother and his valuable friendships with his church friend. These are all linked to his relational dimension of the self. As Figure 4.8 shows, Rico's personal self is overlapped by incorporating his deceased uncle, his mother and close church friends within his self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). There was no story relating to his collective dimension of the self. As a result, the collective self is not incorporated in Rico's personal self. His pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personal-relational equilibrium self-configuration.
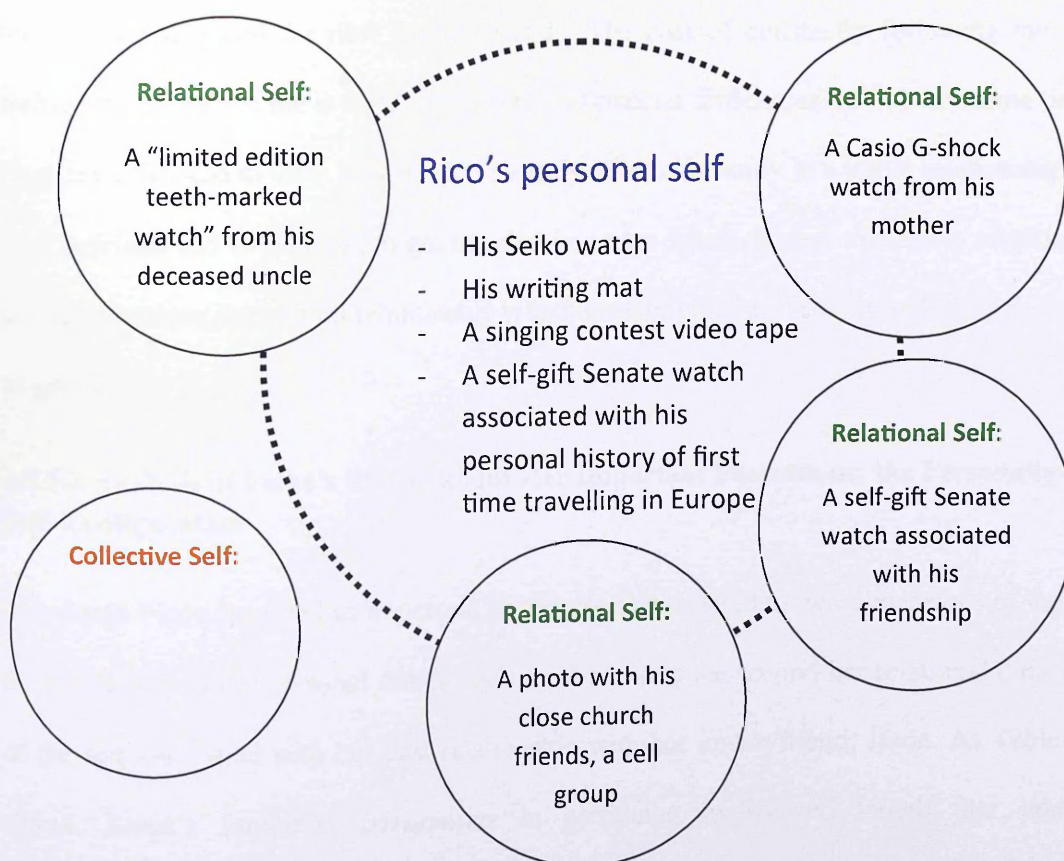
Figure 4.8: Rico's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

4.3.7 Fiona

4.3.7.1 Fiona's Life Narrative

Fiona is a 36-year-old general product manager in a clothing company who always had a talent for drawing and fashion design. She enjoyed expressing herself through drawing when she was a little girl. She had a happy childhood growing up with her siblings and parents in a public housing estate. She is a self-motivated, focused, diligent woman who knows her goals and always aims for them. She believes that studying hard and achieving good results in public exams will give her a better chance of social mobility and help in finding a better job. After completing her GCSEs, she enrolled in a diploma course for fashion and interior design, followed by a degree course. Working in the clothing industry, she follows the latest trendy fashion very closely, never misses out on any hot items in the fashion market and is always in the pioneering group for new fashion trends. The cost of constantly following the latest fashion trends means she is regularly in serious financial difficulties. It took her some time to clear her debts and to learn how to spend wisely. She is currently in a stable relationship with her boyfriend and is planning to get married in a near future. Before this stable relationship, she had a serious but painful relationship with her ex-boyfriend, Jason. It took her a long time to get over it.

4.3.7.2 Analysis of Fiona's Stories about Her Important Possessions: the Personally-led Self-Configuration

The things Fiona regarded as important possessions are related to two dimensions of the self, the first involves her personal dimension of the self and the second her relational dimension of the self associated with her past relationship with her ex-boyfriend, Jason. As Table 4.10 shows, Fiona's important possessions in particular emphasized largely her personal dimension of the self based on her personal history, self-expression and achievement in her narratives. In addition, Fiona's two watches received as gifts from her ex-boyfriend, Jason

reflected the past relational dimension of her self. There was no story relating to the collective dimension of the self. Her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personally-led self-configuration.

In terms of the self-possession boundary, Fiona regarded self-gifts (a Christian Dior watch and a Rolex watch) and gifts that she received from close others (e.g. Seiko, Vivienne Westwood and Corum watches) as her important possessions in her narratives.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Fiona's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Self-expression (future goal)	A Rolex watch
	Achievement	1) A Rolex watch
		2) A Christian Dior watch
	Personal history	1) A Seiko watch
		2) A Christian Dior watch
	Utilitarian	A Rolex watch
Relational Self	Memories of the past with her ex-boyfriend, Jason	Corum and Vivienne Westwood watches
Collective Self	-	-

Table 4.10: Fiona's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Fiona's stories capture how her life has changed from her uncontrolled, unstable and insecure past self to her controlled, stable and secure present self in her life stages. During her storytelling, she moved back and forth between the past and the present time, evaluating how she had changed over the past 15 years. Possessions act as transitional objects that link people from their sense of the past to the present (Belk 1991b, Myers 1985). Her life story is based on how these possessions reveal her self-change from her unstable past self (relationships with ex-boyfriends and financial troubles) to her stable present self with a stable relationship and a debt-free life. Fiona is satisfied with herself at the present time and looks forward to marrying her boyfriend and developing her career even further in the future.

Fiona began her first story about the gifts that she had received from Jason whom she had dated about 15 years ago. Fiona received two watches (Corum and Vivienne Westwood watches) as gifts from her ex-boyfriend, Jason on two occasions and regarded these two watches as among her important possessions linking to painful memories of her past relationship with Jason. She met Jason at a young age while she was studying for her degree course in fashion design at university. She was young and innocent in contrast to Jason who was more sophisticated and experienced in relationships. Materialistically, Jason had the ability to purchase expensive gifts (e.g. handbags, jewelleries, flowers) for Fiona and to drive an expensive car to make her feel like a princess. However, these luxury materials have negative association with life satisfaction (Wong and Ahuvia 1998). They only brought more pain than happiness for Fiona. Emotionally Jason was not there for her. Fiona felt lonely most of the time. These watches reminded Fiona of her emotional unstable past self.

> *Fiona: "It is a different stage. Vivian Westwood... it is my first fashion watch. I really like Vivian Westwood. It is not worth of that much coz it is just a fashion watch. Corum is the first watch I have acquired what an expensive watch should be. It was the first birthday present I got from Jason. It (the relationship) was really painful. It cost him HKD 7,000 to 8,000 (£450 - £ 530) at that time. Corum is so expensive. It is one of the ten expensive watches, after Rolex. I got to know 10 most expensive watches through him. Although he gave me an expensive watch, he didn't spend any time with me on my birthday. I didn't expect that he wouldn't spend any time with me on my day. I had to call friends up to ask them to celebrate my birthday. It was my first birthday with him and he was busy with something else. Not just my friends. I was really shocked. I was crying and sad. I received an expensive gift that did not have any meaning. The watches, to me, don't have not any meanings to me although I have been wearing them for so many years.*

Fiona continued to tell a second story about her important possession, her Christian Dior watch that marked a particular stage of her life in her personal history and achievement in clearing her debt. Fiona was a big spender because she enjoyed purchasing fashionable trendy items and being ahead of the trends. At the same time, she was insecure about herself after her painful relationship with Jason. As a result, she used shopping as a means of compensation in order to relieve her sense of insecurity and give herself some kind of

comfort (Gould 1997). Shopping is part of compensatory consumption that helps Fiona deal with her unsatisfactory life (Gronmo 1988). Woodruffe (1997) suggested that people use shopping for the purpose of compensatory consumption not only as a means to compensate for their overall unsatisfied life stages but also as a signal that they lack control in their lives. Fiona put herself into a serious debt with her credit card bills for a few years and she found that hard to deal with. Fiona felt that she had a loss of self for those years and finally decided to deal with her insecure self emotionally and financially. After consulting a bank about reconstructing the payments, she paid back all her debts and learned a new way of spending wisely. Fiona regained and reclaimed her control of her life, i.e. she became free debt and moved on with her life. In order to celebrate and mark the new stage, she bought a Christian Dior watch to reward herself with a self-gift (Mick & DeMoss 1991).

The Christian Dior watch has two symbolic meanings for her. Firstly, it signified and celebrated a new stage of her life (a new self) that she was no longer overwhelmed by debt. With the good salary she earned, she started to have a positive cash flow into her account and had better control over her spending. Secondly, this watch symbolized her desire to be happy and in a stable relationship. By wearing this watch, Fiona projected her ideal self and hoped one day she would find her happiness in relationships just like her friend, *"Wing's sister-in-law"* who is *"so blessed and happy"*.

> Fiona: *"Christian Dior... is the first watch that I had money to buy a relatively more expensive watch for myself. Although it was not that expensive... I wanted to reward myself that I am able to earn that much money. I was always in debt. But finally I was not any more and had extra money to spend on. It was meaningful coz I did not feel that I had to save a lot. Also, I remember Wing's sister-in-law had one. Wing's brother is a lawyer and his wife was wearing this watch. I looked at her and thought that this lady is so blessed and happy. That model was new and the pattern is very special and beautiful. I really wanted it. Although after many years and the watch was off-trend, this watch, I paid by myself. I think it is so meaningful."*

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In addition, Fiona narrated how her values in life had changed through her third story about her Seiko watch that she had received from another ex-boyfriend, Nick. Although the possession was a gift from her ex-boyfriend, she only concentrated on her personal self in terms of how she has changed. The narrative about this watch carries meanings from both the past and the present and bear witness to how she has changed from a person who is focused on superficial things like her appearance to being a person who appreciates her own inner beauty. Although the watch is related to her ex-boyfriend, Nick, Fiona's emphasis on this story is about her realization of the changes in her personal values from the past personal self (e.g. focusing on superficial appearance) to the present personal self (e.g. appreciating her own inner beauty). The watch is still the same watch. But the person who owns the watch has changed. It has helped her to evaluate and realize how she has changed from the past self to the present self in her life transition (Mehta and Belk 1991).

> Fiona: "Then Nick's Seiko watch. It is about a question of value. If today someone gives me a Seiko watch, I would think it is ok. I quite like the design of the watch. But at that time I was looking for someone rich to marry. I thought I should be spoiled by my boyfriend. But Nick is a practical person. When he gave me the watch and said that I would like the design of it, then I said "Ah?!" He said, "this is quite a good watch. I got a really good discount" I was furious coz I thought it was because of the discount then he bought it for me. Now when I look back, it is quite funny. If Roy (her current boyfriend) gives me this watch today, I would have no problem at all. It is really interesting. When I look back, I realized that my value has changed. It is not the watch that changed my value. I think it is funny coz I don't understand I had such a reaction (being furious). Now I think Nick didn't do anything wrong. My expectation of relationship in the past is so different from what my current expectation."

A Rolex watch was always a dream watch for Fiona to acquire in the future and is regarded as one of her important possessions. Fiona expressed her future plan (self-expression – future goal) in acquiring a Rolex watch in her final story as a motivation to achieve something successful in the future. To a certain extent, Fiona projected her future successful self through her desire and justification in buying a Rolex watch in the future and promised herself that she would buy it someday as a self-gift to reward herself (Mick and Demoss 1990a). It is

interesting to see how Fiona views a possible-future watch as her important possession because her desire toward a Rolex is so strong that she has to find a way to acquire it and to set a target for herself to achieve.

> Fiona: "It is like having a black dress at home... any time... you can use it. It fits in most of the occasions. You can wear a black dress when attending a wedding or funeral. Wild (her female friend) thought I am very interesting coz I always buy something to guarding the door"[12]. Of course, when the time comes, you have some that is ready to go. You can wear Rolex at any occasion, casual, sporty or formal occasions. It matches to most of the occasions. You can wear CD with sporty clothing coz it just doesn't match with the image. I really want one but it is so expensive, around HKD 20K to 30K (£1,350 to £2,000)."

Revisiting Fiona after two and a half years demonstrated how she has changed as her life experience, stages, situational contexts change. By the time of the second visit, Fiona had married and feels very *"stable, secure"* and *"more positive"*. She is very content with her present self: everything feels under control and she can focus on developing her career. Fiona's life story has developed from the *"unstable"*, *"lonely"*, *"wrong"* and *"insecure"* past self to the *"stable"*, *"secured"*, *"control"*, *"settled"* and *"more positive"* present self.

> Fiona: "It's better than before. We just bought a new house. ... become more stable. Getting married with him (Roy) gave me a sense of security... very stable. When I go home, there is always somebody there waiting for you. I don't have to think about my private life [love relationship]... settled... I can focus on my work and my career. Hmm... financially... I am more stable. It's the sense of feeling. I feel included... when he prepares or does something, he always prepare extra for me. I don't have to travel alone any more. There is always somebody... partner travelling together with you. Knowing somebody will prepare stuff for me... this is the feeling of security I meant. I have become more positive... Because of the marriage. It is a healthy partnership. He is there to share everything with me. Some of the way of thinking... I will never think like that from that angle. But having one more person help me analyse things... new input... new way of thinking... very content. I am back to the right track... not going to the wrong direction."

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[12] People in Hong Kong use an expression "having something to guard the door" to describe things they are always nearby just in case you need it. For example, people stock up on painkillers and cough medicines to "guard the door" just in case when they fall ill and suddenly need the medicines.

In the light of her personal self-development, Fiona finally achieved her dream of buying her desired object, a Rolex watch. Her dream of buying a then-possible-future watch was finally realized. *"For me... buying a watch is a statement... just like somebody buying a car. I have been talking to myself for many years... "one day I will buy one of the top ten watches in the world. Now I bought it ... symbolizing I have one step forward. This year, I deserved it."* The watch symbolizes her achievement in increasing the sales for the company she is working for. When she first worked for this company 8 years ago, she was an inexperienced and young graduate. Then she worked for different companies before being invited to help this company again. After eight years of work experience, she is no longer an inexperienced graduate who is *"insecure"*. In contrast, she is an experienced confident woman who helps improve the sales for the company. She achieved her targets and rewarded herself with a Rolex watch. *"This season... the sales went up... and this and that... I haven't got full marks out of 100 but I can see I have made some improvement in the company. That's why. I feel that I deserved something... something to reward myself. It is very interesting... now I bought it."* From an inexperienced and incompetent past self as a fashion designer to an experienced, competent and confident production manager, Fiona achieved her dream as a successful career woman. As a promise to herself, she bought her dream watch to celebrate and reward herself in the rite of passage (Mick and Demoss 1990a) as well as to mark this successful stage in her life.

To summarize, Fiona's stories reveal two contrasting selves, i.e. her uncontrolled, unstable and insecure past self and her controlled, stable and secure present self in different life stages of her life. Fiona's possession stories reflected largely her emphasis on her personal dimension of the self - in terms of her personal history of how she has changed - and her self-expression and achievement in her success at work and in a financial debt free life.

In addition, Fiona's watches that she had received as gifts from her ex-boyfriend, Jason, reminded of her painful memories of the past relationship and linked with her relational dimension of the self. This painful past relationship had an impact on Fiona's life and resulted in including Jason in her self in her narratives (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Figure 4.9 captures Fiona's stories about her important possessions under the view of the trichotomization of the self. Fiona's personal self is slightly overlapped by incorporating Jason in her self. There was no story linking to her collective dimension of the self. Her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personally-led self-configuration.

Fiona's personal self

- Christian Dior watch
- Seiko watch
- Rolex watch

Collective Self:

Relational Self:

A Corum and Vivienne Westwood watches from Jason
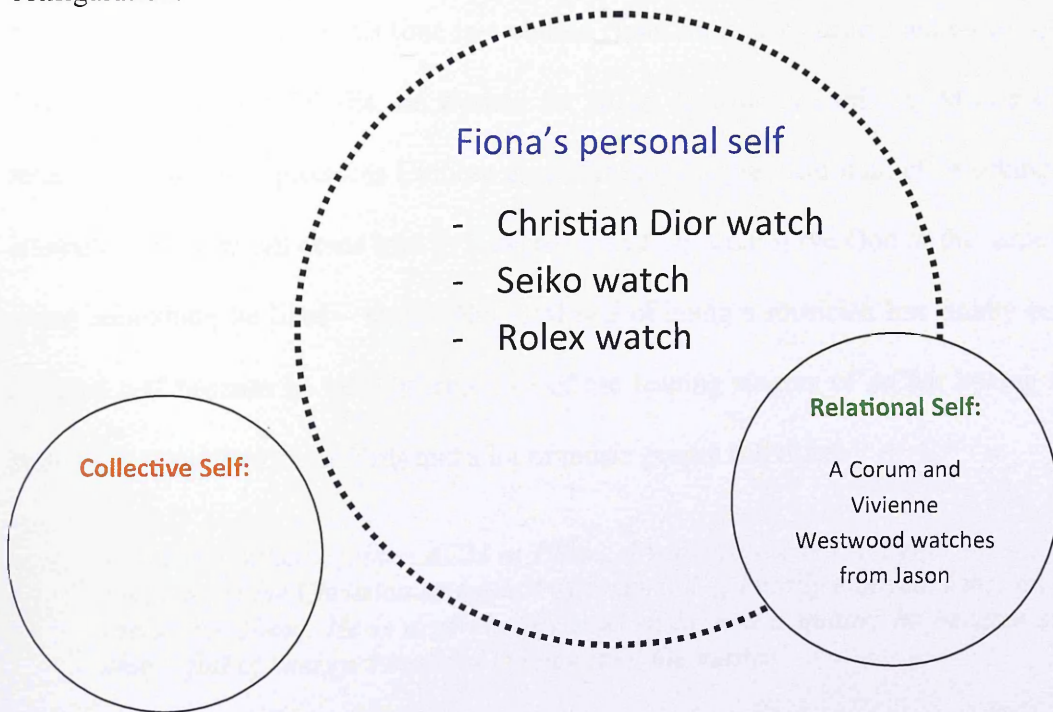
Figure 4.9: Fiona's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

4.3.8 Edward

4.3.8.1 Edward's Life Narrative

Music is Edward's life. All his meaningful possessions are related to music. *"If we follow this line, all the meaningful items I have are related to music."* Edward is 38 years old and the music director in a Christian music company, called ACM. He grew up in a family with two younger sisters. His mother was a primary school teacher and his father was a bus driver. He had a happy childhood with a stable family. His parents have been very supportive of his passion for music and encouraged him to pursue his passion. Edward discovered Christianity when he was in a high school and gradually became a serious believer. He spent a lot of his time in a church choir and other musical activities in church. After completing his GCSEs, he worked for ACM as a junior clerk. ACM is a Christian music company that produces Chinese gospel music for the local market. Working for the company was a dream come true to Edward so that he could serve God at the same time as doing something he likes – music. His ideal self of being a musician has finally become a realized self because he later became one of the leading singers of ACM, having a group band with several music records and a lot of music gospel activities.

> *Edward: "When I joined ACM in 1994... I was just a clerk to begin with... then we recorded some Christian songs... it was something I really enjoyed. I met my mentor there, Mr Hung. He is a gentle guy... when he had a guitar; he became someone else... full of energy. I realized the power of the music."*

After working at ACM for seven years, he decided to leave the organisation to set up his own music company to organise musical projects in different schools in Hong Kong. There were two reasons for him to leave the company. On the one hand, Edward wanted to have his own company and earn more money. On the other hand, he was not happy with the interpersonal relationships in the company. Therefore, he left the company.

Edward: "6 or 7 years ago. The reason I left... superficially, I wanted to set up my own company. But deep down, it was some interpersonal issues that I couldn't deal with. Therefore, I left the company. I didn't know how to deal with it. Now I talked about... sound very naïve. I wanted to have good people in a company. Of course, this is not possible. It is impossible."

Although Edward left the company 7 years ago, he realized that it was not the mature way to escape from the problems. Now he rejoined ACM After gaining some work experience by setting up his own company and becoming a mature person, he thought he was ready to finish his *"unfinished business"* with ACM. He contemplated the idea of going back to the company for two years and to challenge the *"unfinished business"*, i.e. to deal with his fear and to serve the youth through Christian gospel music. Edward wanted to serve God and had a calling to dedicate himself to the youth through this music. Having rejoined and worked for ACM for two months, he finally was convinced that he had the ability to take up a senior position as a music director at ACM and truly believed he has made the right decision.

Edward: "It is time to go back to finish the unfinished business. During these months, I could "master" some people that I didn't think I could do it in the past. Also, the unfinished business with ACM. The people I used to work with are all gone. But the fear I had in the past is still there. In the past 2 months, I tried to find myself in a group. I found it and I found my position in the group. I have the ability to handle the job... I have the ability to handle the interpersonal relationship. To a certain extent, I have the leadership skills. The achievement... helps me conquer my fear. God helped me to face my fear. I always struggle whether I should earn money or I should serve God. My unfinished business... 2 things I want to do some Christian work and I want to serve God or do this Christian work at ACM. The interesting part is that I decided to work for the youth then I got a chance to come back to ACM."

4.3.8.2 Analysis of Edward's Stories about His Important Possessions: the Personally-led Self-Configuration

The things Edward regarded as important possessions are related to two dimensions of the self, the first involves his personal dimension of the self in music, the second his relational dimension of the self associated with his relationship with his wife. As Table 4.11 shows, Edward's important possessions in particular emphasized his personal dimension of the self in terms of his personal history (the discovery of his passion in music through listening to

cassette tapes), self-expressive of his talent in music (skills of playing different musical instruments) and his achievement in music (his cars that he no longer has and ACM CDs). Edward maintained his music-related dimensions of the self through his consumption and possessions (Kleine and Kleine 2000). Edward emphasized his personal dimension of the self (his individualistic talented self) in his narratives. In addition, Edward's wedding ring symbolized his affection and affiliation with his wife, Katy who has helped him throughout the ups and downs in his career. There was no story relating to his collective dimension of the self. His pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personally-led self-configuration.

In terms of self-possession boundary, Edward regarded self-gifts (e.g. his cars that he no longer has) and other objects (e.g. cassette tapes, CDs, musical instruments and his wedding ring) as his important possessions in his narratives.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Edward's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Personal history	Two cassette tapes
		Cars Edward no longer has
		ACM CDs
	Self-expression	Musical instruments
		ACM CDs
	Achievement	Cars Edward no longer has
Relational Self	Enhancing, strengthening and cultivating relationship	His wedding ring
Collective Self	-	-

Table 4.11: Edward's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Edward's first story about his important possessions was about two cassette tapes. His interest in music started with two cassette tapes that symbolized his personal history (Richins 1994b, Dittmar 1992). Edward realized that he could express his emotions through music and he enjoyed listening to the same tape *again and again for a long period of time*". In other words, he found the power and passion of music. This was the beginning of Edward's music

journey. His past personal talented self as a beginner in music gradually brought him further along the musical path and motivated him to pursue his knowledge in music by learning how to play different musical instruments.

> *Edward: "It is the cassette tape... Lam Chi Chong. These two items made me realized my passion of music. I just love music so much. It is Lam's music... called "A person". Every time after school, the first thing I did when I went home was to listen to his music... the same song again and again for a long period of time. It was before I learned how to play the piano. It was a big impact and I was happy when listening to it. Then it was another cassette tape... Alan Tam. I was very impressed by his music. The impact of music... the song was a sad song and it made me sad and cried."*

Emphasizing his personal dimension of the self in music, his second story about his important possessions is related to his personal creative experience and self-expression. Edward had cultivated and expressed his personal dimension of the talented self further in learning different musical instruments. He regarded these musical instruments (e.g. a piano, a guitar, an electric guitar, and a drum) as his important possessions revealing his personal creative experiences (Richins 1994b, Dittmar 1991). Possessions not only consist of emotional and symbolic meanings but also provide instrumental means that helps people cultivate their sense of self (Dittmar 1991, Hogg 1998). From finding passion in music in the cassette tapes to learning to play different musical instruments, Edward was motivated to cultivate his future self as a musician and to enhance his abilities in music in order to turn his possible self into his actual self. Edward was at a stage that he turned his dream (his possible talented self) into reality by learning different musical instruments and by equipping himself in order to develop further his hobby into his career. Although Edward regarded the cassette tapes and musical instruments as his past personal self, the significant meanings of these possessions do not stop in the past. In contrast, Edward still continuously defined himself largely these music-related possessions. They play significant parts in constructing his self.

> *Edward: "I was little. It is the piano. It was the first time I learned music. I was at Primary 4. My sister was playing the piano at the same time. I played the piano a*

long time and started enjoying it when I joined a youth music club. I was so impressed with a guy there, Mr Yip. He just improvised his music and jammed with the others. I realized you can have fun with music. I realized the power of music… the electric guitar. I learned how to play guitar first then switch to the electric guitar. Because I know how to play piano, it was easy for me to learn to play the electric guitar. Then I know my potential in music and I have the ability to play. Then I learned how to play the base and the drum."

From his discovery of his passion in music and acquiring knowledge in playing different musical instruments, Edward's third story of his important possessions is about his achievement in music industry. In addition, these cars revealed his self-negotiation between two contrasting identities (a successful businessman vs. a dedicated Christian). His cars represented his successful career as a company owner with high income, whereas his identity as a dedicated Christian means that he would give up his own company to work for a Christian music company with lower income.

From his discovery of his passion for music and acquiring the ability to play different musical instruments, Edward was proud of his achievement in setting up his own company. People used possessions not only to signify their personal achievement but also to differentiate themselves from others by emphasizing their individuality, achievements and uniqueness (Schultz et al. 1989). Edward acquired his cars through self-gifts in order to reward or indulge himself and sometimes to celebrate achievements in his life (Mick and Demoss 1990a). The cars are part of his personal extended self and his ego ideals (Niederland and Sholevar 1981, Belk 1988). He considered his brand choices of cars marked the different stages of his personal achievements in business. In order to celebrate his success, he bought his first car Peugeot. Peugeot represented not just a car to him. It is a fast sporty car, *"the king of handling curvy roads"* representing his abilities in handling the challenges and his identity as a businessman who is in control of his situation, taking risks and making a profit. As his company profits increased, his standard of living also improved. To celebrate his improved

standard of living, he bought a more expensive and prestige car, Lexus. Switching from his

first car, a Peugeot, to Lexus also signified his continued success and marked his achievement

in life.

> Edward: "I left ACM [a music production company producing Chinese Christian gospel songs] and set up my own company. For men... I wanted to prove myself something. After setting up a company, I bought a car, Peugeot. The car symbolizes some kind of achievement. I have certain demands for cars... the design... the brand.... from the first car... from Peugeot to Lexus... I felt that my status has improved in that stage."

However, compared with his own profitable business in the past to his job at present, Edward

now earned less money than before by working for the Christian music company, ACM.

Edward reflected his identity dilemma (his identity as a successful man vs. his identity as a

dedicated Christian) in negotiating between serving God (his spiritual self) with less income

and giving up his Lexus, i.e. the symbol of his achievements in business in the past, as he did

not have extra disposal income necessary to support the expensive car. Reluctantly, Edward

was in the process of selling his car. Disposing of his car was viewed as disconnecting

himself from some part of his identity. As a result, the disposition brought him sorrow, as he

did not want to let go (Belk et al. 1989). Throughout his narratives, Edward reflected on how

his attitude has changed from being materialistic to being more spiritual and trusting in God

on this matter.

> Edward: "I guess I am...I know if I sell the car, it doesn't mean that my achievement will be gone. I passed that time. I don't need the car to show off my achievement. God has given good time to make this decision. I have several months to settle down at ACM. For me, cars have some special meanings to me. Can I let it go? Few months ago, I felt OK to let go my car. God has opened a way for me. We were lucky to get into the program of "Buy-your-own-house" scheme. I got really good mortgage from a bank. The guy at the garage said he could help me to sell the car."

Edward attempted to understand how he had changed in the construction of his fourth story

about his ACM records/ CDs. While the process of disposing of the car symbolised his

hesitation between serving God and indulging himself, his ACM records helped him confirm

that he had made the right decision to disconnect from the identity of a successful businessman with a luxurious lifestyle and to reconnect with the identity of being a dedicated Christian using his musical talent to work for the Christian music company. These CDs revealed his past inexperienced self at work as a junior clerk at ACM and his present experienced work self as a music director at ACM. These possessions symbolized his self-expression (his personal dimension of the self) that is his passion for music and his capabilities to perform in his work as a music director. It was not easy for Edward to change his career path from a businessman with a good income to a dedicated Christian working for a Christian organisation for a relatively lower income. Possessions that carry a sense of the past self helped Edward narrate his stability and development of changes in self in his life stories (Kleine et al. 1995).

> Edward: "It took me 2 years to make this decision. I took my time to understand how I felt. Did I want to take another risk? Am I looking for security? There is more risk to have your own company. Working in a company has less risk but more security. What do I want? How about our financial issue? How about my work?"

His ACM records are like testimonies or milestones that mark different life events and transitions. These CDs represent his personal history as a junior clerk and a leading singer (his personal dimension of the performing self) more than 8 years ago. However, the emotional and symbolic meanings of these CDs evolved over time and Edward had additional meanings for them. These CDs involved intertwined personal memories (Belk 1991a) at the company and affirmed his decision to dedicate himself to the company. These CDs not only represented his history as a singer (his past performing self) at ACM, but also contained additional meaning to help him affirm his decision to work for ACM again.

> Edward: "I used to be a junior at ACM. Coming back to ACM... I guess setting up a company on your own and other work experience help. This year ACM is in charge of Frank Graham's Gospel Talk in Hong Kong. I met those big guys, priests again when I worked at ACM long time ago. But this time, I was not a junior anymore. They

remembered me. We all have changed. We all used to be juniors in different organizations. But I have the special networks with these people for ACM."

Edward reflected on his relational dimension of the self through his last story about his wedding ring that is linked to his relationship with his wife, Katy. The wedding ring is a magical item (Belk 1991) that marked their life stage from a dating couple to a married couple and contains the culturally shared meanings as well as multiple layers of their idiosyncratic shared meanings that are woven together to form a special and intimate relationship (Ruth et al. 1999, Montgomery 1988). From his personal growth through accepting his weaknesses to his work at ACM, Katy is always the supportive one who helped. Katy is not only a good partner but also a good co-worker in his own music company and at ACM. The wedding ring is seen as symbol of what they were, what they have been and what they are attempting to commit to and become (Schultz et al. 1989). Meaningful relationship with a romantic partner results in including the significant others in the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

> Edward: "Now it comes to the ring... my wife. She helps me a lot. She covers lots of my weakness. She understands my weakness and knows when to help me... a good partner. From her, I learned my shortcomings. And I thought I was perfect. When she pointed out my weaknesses, I was not happy. Then I learned it is my blind spot. She helps me understand myself. I learned how to accept that I am not perfect. That helps me to accept the others who are not perfect. Coz I thought people should achieve what I expect coz I am looking for perfect work. This is important. She helps me with my company and my work at ACM."

To summarize, Edward's possession stories reflected largely his emphasis on his personal dimension of the self in terms of his personal history of how he developed his interest in music over time, his self-expression through music, achievement in music industry, and identity negotiation. In addition, Edward's wedding ring signified his commitment towards his wife on his relational dimension of self. Edward regarded Katy as part of his self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Figure 4.10 captures Edward's stories about his important possessions

under the view of the trichotomization of the self. Edward's personal self is slightly overlapped by incorporating Katy in his self. Edward did not have any stories relating to his collective dimension of the self. As a result, there is no overlapping of the collective self in Edward's self-configuration. Edward's pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personally-led self-configuration.

Edward's personal self

- Cassette tapes
- Musical instruments
- Peugeot and Lexus cars
- Edward's ACM records

Collective Self:

Relational Self:

His wedding ring
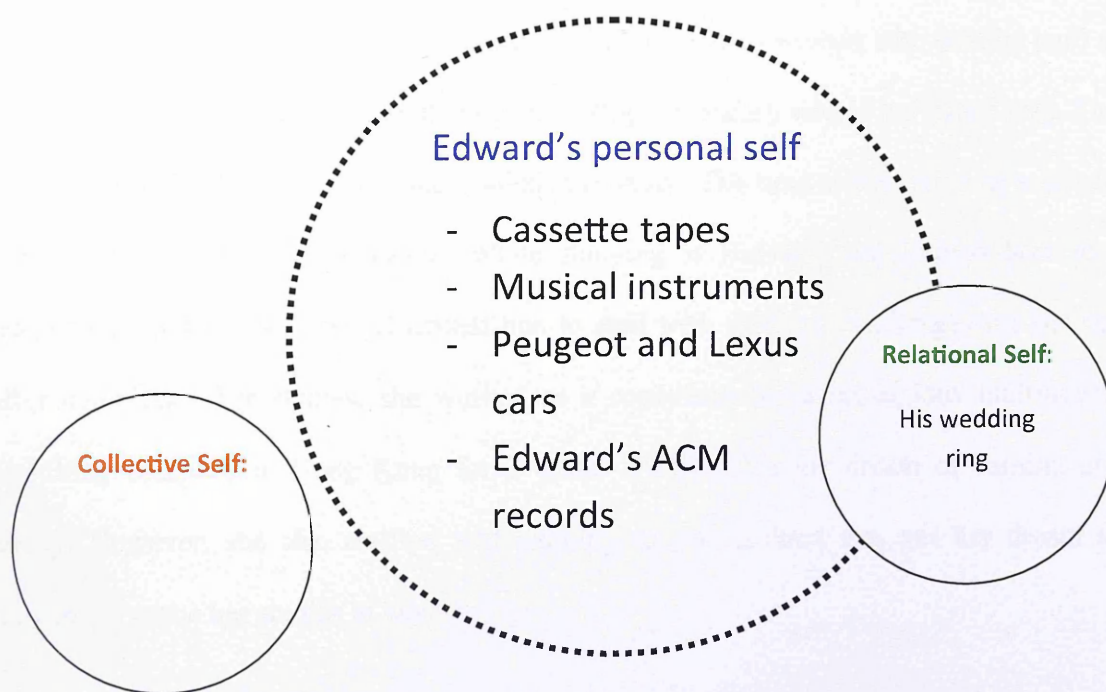
Figure 4.10: Edward's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the self

4.3.9 Ada

4.3.9.1 Ada's Life Narrative

Ada is a 29-year old law student. Her family are Mainland Chinese immigrants who immigrated to Hong Kong in the 80s. Ada lived with her parents and two elder sisters. Life was not easy for the family when they came to Hong Kong as immigrants. Her parents had to start to build their family from scratch in a foreign place. The family lived on a tight budget. Both parents needed to work long hours to support the family. Although Ada's childhood has not been surrounded with material items (e.g. toys and clothes), she found a way to enjoy her childhood. Spending a great deal of time reading books in the library with her sisters was her biggest entertainment. Ada regarded herself as a goal-oriented woman who studied hard and strove for a better future. She first attended a prestige secondary school in Hong Kong. Then, winning a scholarship meant that she studied at Harvard. The time at Harvard was a valuable time for Ada to grow as a person. While studying at Harvard, she learned how to be independent and to take care of herself and to deal with different challenges on her own. After completing her studies, she worked as a consultant for a prestigious multinational consulting company in Hong Kong for 3 years. She fulfilled her dream of earning good money. However, she also realized that working as a consultant was not her dream and decided to pursue her studies in law.

With her family upbringing, she learned that she had to work hard to achieve her dream. Ada is an achiever and a challenger who works very hard to achieve her goals, to earn good money and to enjoy life with the best she can have. Therefore, when it comes to consumption (e.g. holiday trips), she would choose the best she can afford because she believes she deserves to have the best because she works hard for it. Ada used self-gifts in order to reward herself and celebrate her achievement (Mick and Demoss 1990a)

Ada: "I think the reason why we (Ada and Sam) always want either the best or nothing is that it is our "grown-up" attitudes that you have to work hard in order to achieve something. In fact, we can relax and don't work hard. People around us... like my family... my sisters... didn't work that hard. But our attitudes are we have to try our best. Until now, I can be poor and have nothing. When I buy a car or on holiday... I want to enjoy... I want 5-star... otherwise... I don't go. I don't think we want to be the best among the people. We just want to be the best in our standard. You can't follow the trend. You can't compare yourself with Lee Ka Shing (note: one of the richest men in Hong Kong). Of course he is the best. Within our choice, we want the best."

4.3.9.2 Analysis of Ada's Stories about Her Important Possessions: the Personal-Relational-Collective Self-Configuration

As Table 4.12 shows, the things Ada regarded as important possessions are related to three dimensions of the self linking to her personal history in school and university (the personal dimension of the self), her relationship with her then-boyfriend and now-husband, Sam (the relational dimension of the self) and her in-group membership (the collective dimension of the self). Her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personal-relational-collective self-configuration. Ada's narratives constantly contrasted her past self growing up with a poor immigrant background and how this background motivates her to study hard in school and university and to strive for her success at present.

In terms of the self-possession boundary, Ada considered a self-gift of a Rolex watch, a gift of a Notting Hill watch that she received from Sam and other objects (e.g. a school magazine, some songs and a film) as her important possessions in her narratives.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Ada's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Personal history	1) Her school magazine
		2) Songs she listened to when she was at 3) Harvard
		4) A film
	Self-expression	A Rolex
	Utilitarian	A Rolex
Relational Self	Enhancing & strengthening relationship with Sam	A Notting Hill watch from Sam
	Memories of the past with specific person(s)	1) A Notting Hill watch from Sam
		2) A film
Collective Self	In-group memberships	A Rolex

Table 4.12: Ada's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Ada's important possession stories mainly reflected her personal history (her personal dimension of the self) in the past that shapes who she is at present. She began her first story about her school magazine as one of her important possessions. She was the editor-in-chief of a school magazine. Ada unpacked the symbolic meanings of this school magazine for her personal history and her achievements that are not only represented by her past self as a secondary student, but also give significant meanings to her present self and will continue to shape who she is in the future, i.e. self-continuity. She used a metaphor of "*delivering a baby*" to describe how difficult and hard the process was of producing the magazine. This experience had a significant impact on her life and taught her how to deal with any difficult situations in different life stages. Ada came to a realization at the end of the story that producing the magazine had taught her a valuable lesson about how not to give up in any difficult situations and this experience still gives her tremendous inspiration in dealing with the challenges she faced in pursuing law at the present time.

Ada: "One thing that is very precious to me is a school magazine. I made it happened. I gave it to Sam to have a look some time ago and told him that that was my baby. The process was as hard as delivering a baby. It took me 10 months. I was the Chief Editor for one year. My high school has a school magazine every year. I was the Chief Editor for one year. It was also the 60th birthday of my school. I was so much

under pressure during the process. That year... was really hard. I had some other extra curriculum. But this one was the most time consuming curriculum. I had to contact so many people and went to the printing house after school. I skipped my lunch during that period rushing to different places. I didn't study that much and my grades were worse than before. Teachers were not happy with me. It was really hard but I enjoyed the process.

Ada revealed how her school magazine carries the past meaning of personal achievement, illustrating how past experiences help people to shape who they are in the present. Every time Ada faces difficulties in life, she would recall the experience of producing the school magazine to encourage herself to pursue her dreams and not to give up. The school magazine is her self-extension, and connects her sense of self to her identity.

Ada: "Every time when I face some difficult situation, I will remember this and remind myself that I can do it under pressure because I did it in the past. If I enjoy doing one thing, I can do it under pressure and go through the hard time. Few weeks ago, I didn't sleep that much coz I was revising my paper again and again. I revised it the whole night without any sleep. No problem. It was really hard. But I was really happy. I have found something I really like and get satisfaction out of it."

Ada continued to share her second story about her important possession, songs she listened to on the radio when studying at Harvard, her personal history. Studying abroad was another challenge that Ada conquered. With a poor family background, she was determined to win a scholarship to pursue her dream to study abroad. Ada excelled in school performance and received a full scholarship to study at Harvard. Ada narrated a story about how she listened to songs while studying at Harvard and recalled her memories of different occasions writing up assignments to achieve her good grades in the middle of the night. These songs have become part of her important possessions - not only the past memories but also the energy source from the songs that help her focus on her work at present and probably in the future. Those songs reminded her of her time at Harvard about feeling *"independent"* and *"energised"* (her independent energised self) when she was working hard late at night. Ada still listens to those songs at the present time in order to bring back that energising atmosphere when she is

writing law essays. Those songs that carried special meanings for her in the past about her student lifestyle will still give her remarkable inspiration and motivation at the present time while she is studying for her law degree. The songs that create an independent and energised motivation to encourage her to work hard in the past as a Harvard student still motivate her in many aspects of her current life, especially to achieve her dream as a lawyer.

> *Ada: "Like yesterday when I was writing an essay, I was listening to some songs I used to listen to a radio in the cold days at Harvard. When I was at Harvard writing essays in the middle of the nights, I had to listen to the radio in order to keep me awake. The radio station aired the same songs again and again at that time. Before I went back to Hong Kong after graduation, I downloaded those songs to my computer. Every time I listen to those songs, it reminds me of my time there and I feel energised. It was always very cold night, say mid-night. I was in a hurry coz I needed to submit the essays at 9 next morning. I felt independent. It was a good grown up memory."*

In addition, Ada narrated her third story about a film that she regarded as one of her important possessions. While she was a student at Harvard, a film of "Bridget Jones Diary" reminded her of her disconnected relationship with her ex-boyfriend linking to her past relational dimension of the self. This film not only revealed her disconnected relationship with her ex-boyfriend but also her discovery of her *"hidden self"*. It is the internal private self (her personal dimension of the self) that she would only reveal it to her self and not to the others. Ada first briefly narrated her painful experience of breaking up with her boyfriend after seeing the film as a background of the story plot. She was shocked and hurt that he broke up with her and had found another girlfriend only a few days after. The film reminded her of her most painful part of her life.

> *Ada: "I just broke up with my ex-boyfriend when BJ was on cinema. We went to see this movie and he broke up with me on the next day. I didn't have that much feeling when seeing the film that night. But when I thought about the film, I found some similarity in it. The film represents my most painful part of my life. I was really sad. We broke up so suddenly. He found somebody after few days. I was really hurt."*

However, Ada spent a large amount of time in the story explaining how she discovered the other side of her personal *"hidden"* self. The self has multiple-dimensions. On one dimension,

Ada projected her self-image as an intelligent and successful woman. On another dimension, her *"hidden self"* is similar to Bridget Jones, the main character in the film, i.e. *"silly and fuzzy"*. This *"hidden self"* is her internal private self that she prefers she keeps to herself (Triandis 1989). This film is important for her because of her discovery of a new side of her self.

> *Ada: "I went to see this film with my girlfriend later. The feeling was reinforced... the reason why I like BJ is because I found myself in her. It is not the usual "me". It is like a hidden part of "me". For some reason, I don't show that part to people. Like... she is a bit silly, fuzzy, like talking to herself... I read the (BJ) as well. I never underlie any of my leisure books in my life. It is so accurate. I believe many girls will find part of themselves in BJ."*

Ada continued sharing her fourth story about her important possession, her Rolex watch. She believes her watch is congruent with her self-image (i.e. self-expression), i.e. *"practical and simple... not flashy"* (Sirgy 1982). More importantly, she could be sure that she would not lose face wearing her Rolex on any occasions, especially at wedding banquets. "Face" involves an individual's perception of social feedback on his/ her self-presentation" (Yau et al. 1999: 98). In Hong Kong, people tend to dress up with their valuable jewellery, watches and handbags at wedding banquets. It is a social gathering where people fully utilize conspicuous products to send a signal to others that they are well off. Her story of Rolex explains how she looks at herself with reference to her in-group, i.e. her collective dimension of the self. Ada used to work for a prestige consulting company where she had to dress up smartly at work. She was surrounded by people who had branded items to reveal their status. In order to match the corporate culture, she found it necessary to portray her self as a professional at work by wearing certain brands of products.

For Ada, the Rolex watch not only has symbolic meanings, but also has an instrumental reference to investment value and financial security (e.g. jewellery or stocks) (Dittmar 1991, Richins 1994b). Hong Kong people's perception of buying Rolex watches is viewed as a

means of investment and security as Ada emphasized the high sale value price in the second-hand market.

> *Ada: "I can wear Rolex for a long time. Also, I can wear it in any occasions or events. It is not that flashy. You need to look closer to realize that it is Rolex. If I wear Rolex at wedding banquets, for sure I will not lose face. The Rolex fits everything. For example, I am having casual wear today. The watch fit my style. The after sales service is quite good. Rolex might be a bit out-dated to some people. Rolex is more practical. Rolex maintains its value high. The resell price is high."*

Apart from possession stories revealing her personal and collective dimensions of the self, Ada also has her final story that is linked to the relational dimension of her self signifying her relationship with Sam, her then-fiancée and now-husband. She described this story of pleasant memories of a trip in Europe as a dating couple, travelling together for the first time. Ada went on narrating the details of how Sam bought this memorable watch for her during their first trip in England. The watch not only symbolized their pleasant time in the UK, but also reminded them of their effort of working hard in order to indulge and reward themselves by treating themselves to a nice holiday (self-gift) "*... spent big money on food and hotel... good restaurants. We enjoy good food and share the same passion*". Also, this watch was a souvenir from the UK, which was associated with memories of a pleasant trip and an event that witnessed a special moment in the past and cultivated and strengthened their relationship creating idiosyncratic shared meanings between them (Ruth et al. 1999).

> *Ada: "The only time I don't wear Rolex is when I am travelling. I am afraid of losing it. I don't want to have one more item to worry about when I am on holidays. At that time, I didn't have any watch to wear while travelling in England. So Sam bought it for me. We had a good time there... real holidays to me. It was the first time we travelled in England. We went to major touristy places and had good food in the evenings. We rather spent big money on food and hotel... good restaurants. We enjoy good food and share the same passion. Anyway, I didn't want to have any expensive watches while travelling... something light and easy... for travelling. We chose it together at Notting Hill. The watch is very simple... just a plastic watch."*

To summarize, Ada's predominant possession themes in her stories is a stable story line of how she has achieved her success by taking up challenges (e.g. the school magazine, studying

at Harvard in the past and pursuing her law studies at present) and working hard to reach her goals reflecting her personal dimension of the self. By celebrating her achievement, she bought herself an expensive gift (e.g. a Rolex watch) or holiday trips to indulge herself and to reward herself (Mick and Demoss 1990a) *"We just want to have the best in our standard"*. Her Rolex watch not only revealed her personal dimension of the self, but also is linked to her collective dimension of the self as she wanted to fit into in-groups Many of her possession stories link to her personal history how she has worked hard to achieve her dream. In addition, Ada's Notting Hill watch signified her relationship with Sam linking to her relational dimension of the self. Ada's self includes both her romantic partner and her in-group affiliation (Ahuvia 2005). As Figure 4.11 shows, Ada's personal self is overlapped by incorporating Sam and her in-group within her self. Her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personal-relational-collective self-configuration.
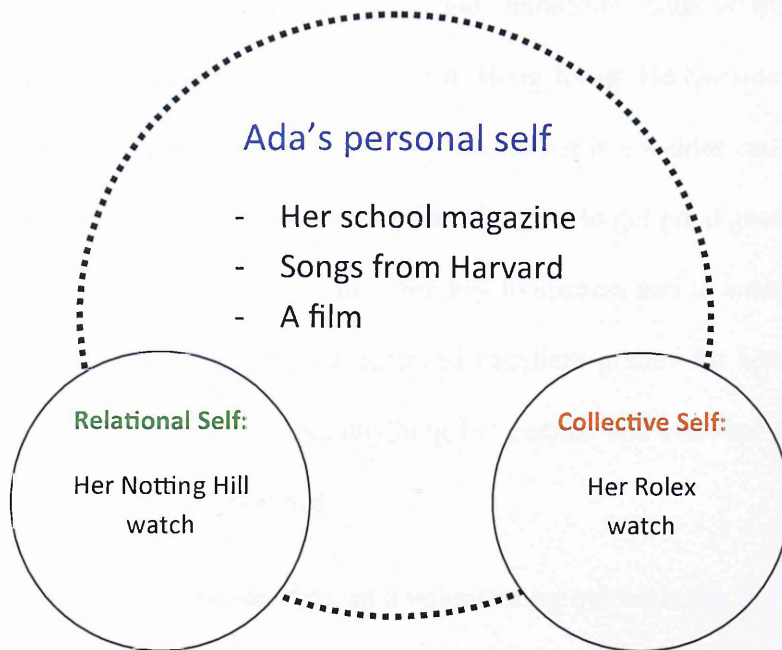
Figure 4.11: Ada's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

4.3.10 Sam

4.3.10.1 Sam's Life Narrative

Sam is a 30-year old radiologist who is young and ambitious. Sam is from a humble background and grew up on a public housing estate in Hong Kong. He has one elder brother and two sisters. He is the youngest son in the family. His father is a welder and his mother is a housewife. His mother always told him to study hard in order to get good grades in order to study in university. He learned that education is the key to success and to achieving a better standard of living. Against all the odds, he achieved excellent grades for his A-levels and enrolled in medical school. He did not take anything for granted and believed that he had to make an effort to earn everything he owned.

He met his then-fiancée and now-wife, Ada, in a volunteering outreach trip to China helping poor people in remote villages in 2002. Both of them share more or less the same values and attitudes to life believing that they have to work hard in order to achieve their dreams. They do not take things for granted. In contrast, they believe they have to work hard to earn every opportunity. They feel justified that they can indulge themselves in different consumption goods (e.g. holiday or a car) because of their hard work. They regard consumption goods as rewards that mark their achievements and motivate them to work harder and they believe that they deserve these self-gifts because of their efforts (Mick & DeMoss 1990).

> Sam: *"Both (His girlfriend and Sam) of our families are not rich. We studied really hard, "beat everybody" and strived for our better future. I graduated (from the medical school) with distinction. Ever since we were little, we did not have any chances to have any materialistic lifestyle. But now we have a choice. I want to have the best this time. Grand wedding... spending money... I can afford it. What I am having at the moment, i.e. the stereo system, a car and a computer, is what I studied hard for. When I buy a car or on holiday, I want to enjoy it. I want a 5-star... otherwise, I don't go."*

4.3.10.2 Analysis of Sam's Stories about His Important Possessions: the Personal-Relational-Collective Self-Configuration

The things Sam regarded as important possessions are related to three dimensions of the self and involve his personal and collective dimensions of the self as a doctor, and his relational dimension of the self as a boyfriend to Ada (Table 4.13). His pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personal-relational-collective self-configuration. In terms of self-possession boundaries, Sam considered self-gifts (e.g. his Dunhill pen and his first and second BMW cars), a gift of an Agnes B watch that he received from Ada and other objects (e.g. his stethoscope that he no longer has) as his important possessions. In addition, Sam regarded an engagement ring that he had bought for and *given* to Ada as one of his important possessions (i.e. the *extended possession*) although Sam does not own this possession suggesting that Sam has a broader interpretation when constructing his sense of self and possessions.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Sam's important possessions
Personal self	Personal history	His stethoscope that Sam no longer has
		A Dunhill pen
		His first BMW
	Achievement	His first BMW
	Self-expression	A Dunhill pen
		His first BMW
Relational self	Enhancing and strengthening relationships	A gift of an Agnes B watch received from Ada
		An engagement ring for Ada
	Memories of the past with Ada	A gift of an Agnes B watch received from Ada
		An engagement ring for Ada
Collective self	In-group membership	His first BMW
	Social status	His first BMW

Table 4.13: Sam's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Sam's identity as a doctor plays a significant role in his self-definition. In the light of his personal dimension of the self, Sam has various possessions that symbolize his personal

history from his past life as a medical student (his stethoscope) to his achievements as a medical officer in a hospital (his Dunhill ball pen). In narrating stories about his BMW, Sam not only revealed his personal dimension of the self but also his collective dimension of the self. He celebrated his achievement and rewarded himself for his hard work and effort in becoming a doctor (his personal dimension of the self) by buying a BMW. This BMW also indicated his in-group membership (the collective self) with doctors and their status.

Being a doctor is one of the biggest achievements in Sam's life. Sam began his first story by narrating his life in the past as a medical student. Sam's stethoscope has a significant symbolic meaning because it represented his past desired personal self as a medical student. Possessions carry not only an instrumental function but also a symbolic expressive value (Dittmar 1992). The stethoscope reminded him of his dream (his past desired self) to be a medical student *"Wow, the stethoscope"* and his memories of studying hard. The stethoscope represents a particular stage in his life and reminds him of the process of becoming a doctor. It is a memorable possession that marked his hard work and success at university. The stethoscope was the first item that signified his status as a medical student and marked this particular stage of his life at university. He used a metaphor in his story that *"the stethoscope is like a testimony that witnessed my growth... the period I studied medicines. I enjoyed it very much. It was hard. But it was worth it."*

> Sam: *"A stethoscope. It is a symbol of being a doctor. The first time I wore it when I was a medical student. But I don't use it any more. I am working in the X-ray unit and don't need to use the stethoscope. The first time I wore it I was "Wow, the stethoscope." The stethoscope is like a testimony that witnessed my growth... the period I studied medicine. I enjoyed it very much. It was hard. But it was worth it."*

The stethoscope represented his past desired personal self as a medical student, whilst his second possession story is about his Dunhill ball pen that symbolized another stage of his life as a hospital medical officer and marked his success after working *"hard"* all this years. It

was not easy for him to find a job. The competition was hectic. Only half of his fellow classmates found jobs in hospital after graduation. Sam was one of the lucky ones who stayed on to work in a hospital. In order to celebrate his success, he bought a pen as a reward (Mick and Demoss 1990a This pen marked his personal achievement in the past and still carries a sense of achievement in the present, and encourages and motivates him to work hard for a better future. Sam finally achieved his dream of becoming a respected doctor.

In choosing a pen that represents his achievement and matches his image, he was very careful to pick one that distinguished him from others in order to show his individualistic values, i.e. his individualistic personal self. He did not want to buy a pen that everybody else might have had (his fellow doctors). Sam wanted to acquire and express his unique identity through the consumption of a special branded pen (Dittmar 1992). Therefore, through the consumption of a less popular brand, he chose a Dunhill pen that is owned by fewer doctors in order to distinguish himself from most of his fellow doctors many of whom use Mont Blanc. Sam emphasized the "extra meaningfulness based on the uncommonness" in his self-gift pen (Mick & Demoss 1990: 325).

> Sam: "This pen witnesses another stage of my life. I bought it when I became a MO (Medical Officer). It is like another symbol that I entered another stage of my life...Not that many people have it. Everybody has Mont Blanc. It is boring. You have the same and I have the same. It is just like an ordinary pen, Pilot. But my PEN is unique. Nobody has it. When people look at it, they know it is a good stuff. It is a symbol of a transitional stage."

The highlight of Sam's self-gifts to celebrate his achievements is the third story about his possession, his first BMW. Sam values his car more than anything else and spent a large amount of his interview narrating his experience, of and pleasure when, driving the car. Sam even personified his BMW and gave her a nickname "Siu Po" (a little precious). He polished her, "talked" to her and took some photos of her. He personified his car as one of his loved ones. "The process of creating and nurturing the extended self through an automobile may be

seen in customizing (personalizing) the car and in lavishing great care on its maintenance" (Belk 1988: 143).

His first BMW played a significant part in his extended personal self and his ego ideal (Niederland and Sholevar 1981). *"I was happy when I was in my car listening to music. My battery was charged."* In addition, his BMW represents his group collective self, i.e. his in-group membership of the medical community, signalling his prestige social class in the society *"Most of the doctors drive BMW as well"*. He had distinguished himself in comparison with a possible negative self, which would have been denoted by purchasing a Japanese car with poor performance that was associated with an old, dreaded self in the past. According to Sirgy's (1982) self-congruent theory, he portrayed his image as a cool, powerful and young professional who had won a respected status in the society.

> Sam: "Cars... I always dream about cars. When did I start paying attention to BMW? It was the time when Jason (his sister's boyfriend) drove BMW. That was the first time I sat in a BMW. I was thrilled. The car is cool. BMW targets young professionals. When you drive BMW, it shows your status. BMW produces good cars... very powerful. Most of the doctors drive BMW as well. When I sat there, it was really cool. BMW is really cool. I drove Honda once. It sucks. The pedal and brake are no good. The engine is no good."

Two identities are important in Sam's self-definition, his professional and in-group identity (the personal and collective dimensions of the self) as a doctor and his identity as a boyfriend for Ada (the relational dimension of the self). When these two are in conflict with one another, Sam had to make a decision to choose between the two. This tension was captured in his narrative when Sam described the process of selling his car in order to generate extra money for the wedding. Sam was in a dilemma between two conflicting identities; an aspiring doctor through his acquisition of his BMW (his personal and collective dimensions of the self) and a loving husband for Ada by having more money for grand wedding (his relational dimension of the self). Sam did not want to let go of the car because he felt as if he

was losing part of his identity as a doctor. However, at the same time, he realized that he had to move on with his life and tried to reason himself out of the situation.

Sam: "I decided to sell the car and used the money to buy her the ring. When I saw my car driven away, I was really sad. The night before the car driven away, we (Sam and Ada) sat in the car and listened to music... polished the car... talked to the car... took some photos. I really miss the car. We called our car Siu Po (meaning – Little Precious)."

Sam: "Every stage of your life has different desires; I have already fulfilled my desire to have a BMW. It is time to let go. I bought this BMW to reward myself that I studied really hard for the past 5 years... What I am doing now is for my future, 10 years onward. I thought about it back and forth and decided to sell the car so that we have spare money to spend on our wedding. Also, it doesn't make sense if I like the car more than her. How can you love an object more than this person?"

People need to go through certain psychological process of dispossession (e.g. final acknowledgement, meaning transfer rituals, outcome assessment and psychological and emotional severance) (Roster 2001). In Sam's case, he moaned about his lost personal self when explaining how much he really missed the car, i.e. the driving experience, the car itself and the time they spent together driving around with the car. However, Sam consoled himself with the thought that he would buy another BMW in the near future once he became richer. His lost self has become a desired self for him, a target he wanted to achieve in future. In this narrative, Sam not only talked about how he had disposed his car, but also constructed his "future-directed narrative" (Thompson 1997: 444) *"I will have a car when I am richer".*

Sam: "I will have a car when I am richer. It is too luxury for me at the moment... I spent about a quarter of my salary. I sold my car and save up the money for our wedding. We have extra money to spend on our wedding."

Sam: "The most pleasant time was driving to work and home... coz I was listening to music in my car... really good mood. The happiest time I had to wake up and to drive to work. After work, I was really exhausted. I was happy when I was in my car listening to music. My battery was charged. But the pleasure... you can't measure it with money. We (Ada and Sam) really miss the time we had with our BMW... happy, pleasant life. You cannot get this kind of pleasure by having a HKD 200, 000 (£25,000) dollars stock account. Once I took her to Stanley beach to have a drink. Then we just drove around the Hong Kong island... very happy... looking up the starry sky when the sky window was opened... was very happy."

Apart from his personal and collective dimensions of the self, Sam also defines himself through his relationship with Ada (his relational dimension of the self). There are two other important possessions that reveal his affiliated relational self, his love and support from his then-girlfriend and now-wife, Ada (Agnes B watch, a gift from Ada) during the SARS epidemic in Hong Kong and his commitment to her (his fourth story about the engagement ring and his fifth story about a gift he bought for Ada)

Sam revealed the depth of his affection and love for Ada by narrating his fourth story about a watch that he had received from her. His Agnes B watch was a gift from Ada and reminded him of her support during a dangerous and difficult moment, the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic outbreak, during his work placement in hospital. Sam was very worried that he would be the next one to contract SARS and die. Thinking of Ada during the challenging time at hospital helped him focus on his work. Their relationship has strengthened through different challenges and SARS is one of them. The watch carried symbolic meanings of love and support with deep emotions.

> Sam: "The one I am wearing is Agnes B. I got it from Ada when I was a medical student having a placement work at the hospital. When I felt really tired during the placement period, I looked at the watch. I would think of her...help me focus on my work. It was really tough. 3 months... like in hell. When I had the night shift and it was really quiet, I looked at the watch and thought about her. It was SARS, you know. When I went to work, I would be worried whether I got a chance to live. Some of my classmate contracted SARS. I was scared... really sacred... thinking that maybe I am the next one."

While his first BMW symbolized his achievement in life and his prestigious status as a doctor, Sam considered an engagement ring he bought for Ada as his fifth important possession in his story. This engagement ring signifies his love and commitment to her reflecting his affiliated relational self. Consistent with his lifestyle, Sam wanted to have a perfect gift for his wife (Belk 1996). Sam's story of how he planned to have a surprise proposal for her with

a big diamond ring (Sherry 1983). Ada is more important to him than anything else in the world, not even his BMW can come between them. *"It doesn't make sense if I like the car more than her. How can you love an object more than this person?"* He prioritised his life around her and wanted to build a promising future together as husband and wife. Individuals tend to develop sense of ownership towards an object through investing their time, money or effort into the object (Pierce et al. 2003). Sam gave up and sold his car in order to buy a perfect ring for Ada. Although this ring does not belong to Sam, he regarded it as part of his important possessions (his *extended possession*).

> Sam: *"Actually, the money I paid for this ring was the money I got by selling my BMW and put a little more money on top of it. She knows that I really love my car. I thought about it back and forth and decided to sell the car so that we have spare money to spend on our wedding. If not, I might have to buy a smaller diamond ring and a defected one instead of this one. Then maybe I should have not proposed to her. Also, it doesn't make sense if I like the car more than her. How can you love an object more than this person?"*

Revisiting Sam after two and a half years provided some additional information on how he has changed as his life experience, stages and situational contexts change. Sam fulfilled his dream of having a perfect wedding *"... exactly what we wanted"*. In addition, Sam was happily sharing his news that he bought a brand new BMW with a detailed story of how he purchased it in his sixth possession story. Through his consumption of a brand new BMW, Sam felt that he had finally been reunited with his lost personal self. Sam reclaimed his autonomous personal self through the consumption of his new BMW. To compensate for his sense of lost self represented by his first BMW, Sam went into details about how he had constructed his car by choosing the colour of the car, the interior of the car, the size of the wheels and engine as if he felt he finally had got the money to construct his dream car. He defined his sense of self largely based on his possession of the self-gift of the BMW. Sam is finally in control of constructing his lost self through his consumption and choice of his

personalised BMW car "*I finally got my car back*". Sam even recorded this special moment of

his life with a camera.

> Sam: "*Right... wow... two and a half years on... I can't believe I said it [I will buy it one day]... Yes, I bought a brand new BMW... the BMW 3 series convertible... 2 doors. Where should I start...I wanted it for so long. At that time, we had a wedding to prepare for and my salary wasn't good. And now... I got my salary increase... easier to support this lifestyle and I have become a fellow in radiology... really a big achievement to celebrate for. I know it is expensive to buy a brand new car... I made a calculation... I can afford it plus I really enjoy driving a BMW... the pleasure... can't really measure. After discussing with Ada, she supported my plan [to a BMW car]. Did you see my car when you came [to the hospital ward] passing by the entrance?*"

> Sam: "*It is the blue... sky blue BMW convertible. I chose the colour... the interior... the leather seats...BMW has attention to details... the lighting in the car... my car is heavier than normal BMW coz it is convertible. I also change the wheel size... bigger... cooler... Although it is 3 series, it is not 320... it is 330... a bit more power in the engine. I ordered it in January this year. It took them 3 months or more to get it tailor-made for me. Ada and I took our camera to record the moment when we picked up the car. I finally got my car back and can drive around HK island.*"

Sam also constructed his future-directed narrative of having children in the near future when

sharing his plan to switch to a family car in the near future. His identity as a doctor still plays

a major role in his self-definition. In the light of his relationship with his wife, he strives for

strengthening and cultivating their relationship together as husband and wife and plans to

have a family together in the near future. In terms of his personal goal, Sam wanted to achieve

more in his career in the near future by pursuing a Master's degree that hopefully will help

him get promoted or find a better job in the future.

> Sam: "*She is going to be a barrister in Dec... she is under so much pressure... needs to set up her own office after her placement. I guess she will be pretty busy then. We talked about having children and when it will be a good timing... maybe I stay in public hospital... earn less but more time with the family if we have children one day... that's why I only set up a two-year instalment for the car and try to pay it off in 2 years. Then we might need switch to a family car... at least 4 doors. We'll see.*"

In summary, Sam learned "no pain no gain" at an early age growing up in a council house. In his life, he has tried the best he can in order to achieve his goals. Sam defined his personal dimension of the self mainly based on his identity as a doctor. In addition, Sam's watch and the engagement ring he bought for Ada signified his commitment towards her on his relational dimension of the self.

In terms of his self-possession boundary, Sam's important possessions included gifts that he had bought for himself (self-gifts) (e.g. his Dunhill pen and BMW cars), had received from Ada (e.g. a watch) and had bought and *given* to Ada, i.e. the *extended possession* (e.g. Ada's engagement ring (as marked * in Figure 4.12). As Ahuvia noted (2005), "the self also includes various levels of group affiliation, specifically individual, family, community, and group..." (p 172).

Sam defined his self through his achievement, his relationship with Ada and the group affiliation with the doctors. Meaningful relationships with Ada or the doctor community result in including them in the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). As Figure 4.12 shows, Sam's personal self is overlapped by including his wife (i.e. the relational dimension) and his doctor community (i.e. the collective dimension) in his configuration of the self. His pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personal-relational-collective self-configuration.

Sam's personal self

- His stethoscope
- His Dunhill pen
- His first BMW
- His second brand new BMW

Collective Self:

A BMW car signified a doctor prestige social status

Relational Self:

A watch from Ada

Relational Self:

*An engagement ring for Ada
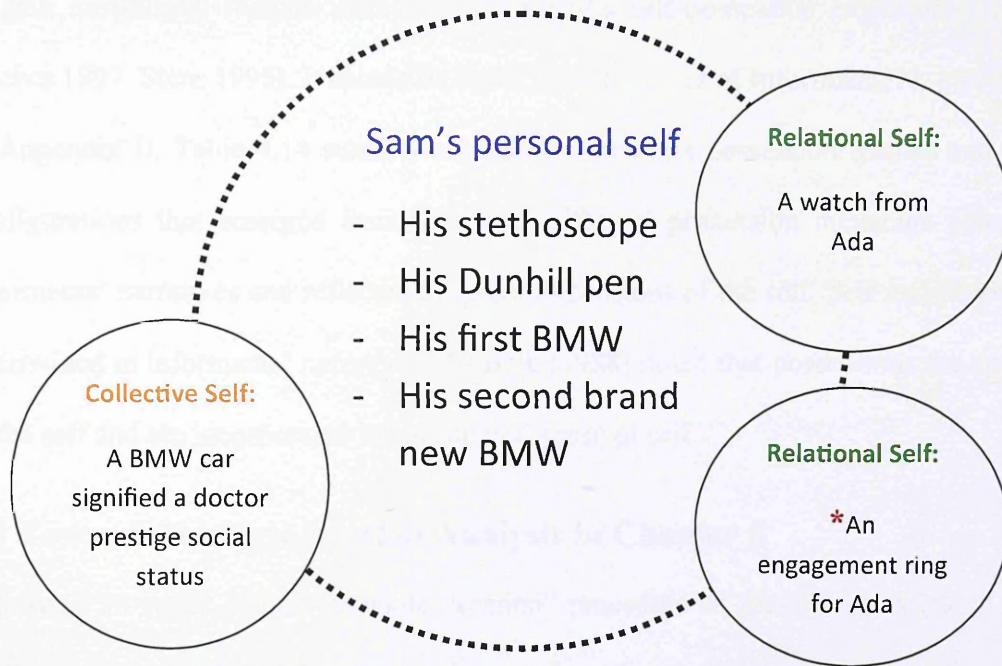
Figure 4.12: Sam's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the self

*= Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their possessions

4.4 Summary of Ten Informants' Narratives

In this chapter, I explored ten informants' narratives (Informant 1 – 10) individually in order to gain meaningful insights into each informant's self-possession experiences holistically (Lieber 1997, Stern 1995). It should be noted that narratives of Informants 11 – 20 are located in Appendix II. Table 4.14 summarizes each informant's possession themes and their self-configurations that emerged from the data. Different possession meanings emerged from informants' narratives and reflected different dimensions of the self. Self and possessions are intertwined in informants' narratives. As Belk (1988) noted that possessions are an extension of the self and are incorporated in consumers' sense of self.

4.5 Towards the Next Level of Analysis in Chapter 5

Following "a series of part-to-whole iteration" procedure of interpretive research suggested by Thompson (1997: 441), in this chapter, I analysed and interpreted each informant's narratives individually (within-case analysis). In the next chapter (Chapter 5), I will explore patterns of possession themes across different informants' narratives of their important possessions reflecting their different dimensions of the self in cross-case analysis. The iteration procedure of the cross-case analysis involves examination of the relationships between the self and important possession meanings and their self-possession boundaries tacking between existing theories and empirical data in order to generate new insights of this area.

Table 4.14: Summary of Meanings of Possessions and Patterns of Self-Configurations in Informants' Narratives

Name of Informants	Possession Themes	Patterns of Self-Configuration
1) Alan	- Enhancing and strengthening relationship with his wife, Yuan - Memories of the past with Yuan	**The complete Relational self-configuration** Alan defines himself based on his relationship with his wife, Yuan.
2) Kate	- Identity negotiation between a married woman and a divorcee in a liminal stage of her life - Memories of the past with her ex-husband and her deceased father - Her past affirming familial relationship with her father	**The complete Relational self-configuration** Kate defines herself through her relationships with her ex-husband and her deceased father.
3) May	- Enhancing, strengthening and cultivating relationship with her husband - Rebuilding relationship with her son - Affirming friendship with her friends - Memories of the past with her husband, her son and her friends	**The complete Relational self-configuration** May defines herself through her relationships with her husband, her son and her friends.
4) Peter	- Self-expression with his Swatch collection - Personal history - Utilitarian – his Casio watches at work - Enhancing and strengthening relationship with Danni - Affirming friendship relationship - Memories of the past with specific person(s)	**The Relationally-led self-configuration** Peter defines himself mainly based on his disconnected relationship with his deceased mother and his existing relationships with his wife, Danni and his close church friends reflecting his relational dimensions of the self and slightly through self-expression and his personal history.

	- "Re-membering" his deceased mother - Identity negotiation between the lost self and the new self	
5) Shirley	- Achievement - Utilitarian - Enhancing and strengthening relationship with her husband - Affirming familial relationships with her sister and mother - Memories of the past with her husband, her sister, and her mother	**The Relationally-led self-configuration** Shirley defines herself mainly based on her relationships with her husband, her sister and her mother and slightly through her career achievement.
6) Rico	- Self-expression - Personal history - Achievement - Affirming familial and friendship relationships - Memories of the past with specific person(s)	**The Personal-Relational equilibrium self-configuration** Rico defines himself based on his personal experience in the past and his relationships with family members (i.e. his deceased uncle and his mother) and close friends.
7) Fiona	- Her personal history and personal change - Her achievement at work - Memories of painful relationship with her ex-boyfriend	**The Personally-led self-configuration** Fiona defines herself mainly through her personal history, achievement, and slight based on her past relationship with Jason.
8) Edward	- Self-expression in music - Personal history in music - Achievement in business - Strengthening and cultivating relationships with Katy - Memories of the past with Katy	**The Personally-led self-configuration** Edward defines himself mainly based on his personal history and achievement in music, and slightly through his relationship with his wife.

9) Ada	- Personal history - Self-expression - Utilitarian - Enhancing and strengthening relationship with Sam - Memories of the past with specific person(s) - In-group membership	**The Personal-Relational-Collective self-configuration** Ada defines herself in terms of her experience in school in the past and her existing relationship with Sam.
10) Sam	- Personal history in medical school - Achievement in finding a job - Rewards and celebration of becoming a doctor - In-group membership with the doctor community - Strengthening relationship with Ada - Memories of the past with Ada	**The Personal-Relational-Collective self-configuration** Sam defines himself based on his professional status as a doctor on personal and collective dimensions and his relationship with his wife, Ada.
11) Ann	- Enhancing and strengthening relationship with romantic partners - Affirming familial relationship with her mother - Memories of the past with specific person(s) - Re-membering the deceased cat, Mike	**The complete Relational self-configuration** Ann defines herself completely based on her past and current relationships with her partners and her familial relationship with her mother.
12) Renay	- Enhancing and strengthening relationship with her husband - Affirming familial relationship with her father -Memories in the past with specific person (s) -Re-membering the deceased loved ones	**The complete Relational self-configuration** Renay defines herself completely based on her relationships with her deceased father in her disconnected relationship and her husband in her on-going existing relationship.

13) Lucy	- Enhancing and strengthening relationship with her husband - Affirming familial relationship with her cousin -Memories of the past with specific person (s)	**The Relationally-led self-configuration** Lucy defines herself largely based on her relationships with her husband and her "big brother" cousin.
14) Jake	- Achievement - Personal history -Utilitarian - Enhancing and strengthening relationship with Shirley - Affirming familial or friendship relationships with others -Memories of the past with specific person (s)	**The Relationally-led self-configuration** Jake defines himself mainly through his romantic relationship with his wife and his family relationship with his father. He also delineates himself slight based on his experience in studying in Australia.
15)Danni	- Achievement - Personal history - Enhancing and strengthening relationship with her husband - Affirming familial relationship with her father - Memories of the past with specific person (s)	**The Relationally-led self-configuration** Danni defines herself mainly based on her romantic relationship with her husband and her familial relationship with her father. She also delineates herself slightly through her experience in receiving her first salary.
16) Winston	- Personal history - Self-expression - Enhancing and strengthening relationship with his wife - Memories of the past with his wife	**The Relationally-led self-configuration** Winston defines himself mainly based on his relationship with his wife and slightly through his childhood memories.
17) Iris	- Personal history - Achievement - Enhancing and strengthening relationship with her ex-boyfriend	**The Relationally-led self-configuration** Iris defines herself mainly through her familial relationships with her

	- Affirming familial relationships with her uncle and cousin - Memories of the past with specific person (s)	uncle and cousin and her past romantic relationship with her ex-boyfriend. Her self is also defined slightly based on her past career achievement.
18) Mark	- Self-expression - Achievement -Personal history - Utilitarian - Identity negotiation between his lost personal self and his present personal self - Enhancing and strengthening relationship - Memories of the past with his ex-girlfriend	**The Personally-led self-configuration** Mark defines himself mainly based on his achievement in sports and slight through his past romantic relationship with his ex-girlfriend.
19) Paul	- Personal history - Self-expression - Enhancing and strengthening relationship with his wife - Memories of the past with his wife - In-group membership	**The Personal-Relational-Collective self-configuration** Paul defines himself based on his past and present lifestyle and his relationship with his wife and his current desire in-group membership.
20) Andrew	- Personal history - Identity negotiation between the past personal self and the present personal self - Enhancing and strengthening relationship with his wife - Affirming familial relationship with his father - Memories of the past with specific person (s) - In-group membership	**The Personal-Relational-Collective self-configuration** Andrew defines himself based on his changes in his personal history, his romantic relationship with his wife, his familial relationship with his father and his past in-group membership.

Chapter 5: Cross-case Analysis

5.1. Introduction

In the preceding chapter of within-case analyses, I presented ten informants' narratives of their important possessions individually, and analysed them separately. In this chapter of cross-case analyses, comparisons across twenty informants' narratives will be drawn (Fournier 1998, Mick and Buhl 1992). I will first examine eleven possession themes (Table 5.1) that emerged from across the empirical data drawn from the narratives of twenty informants and arranged under the trichotomization of the self (the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self) in Section 5.2. Then, I will investigate informants' self-possession boundaries through their possession stories in Section 5.3. This chapter aims to provide a holistic understanding of the meaning of possessions and the self-possession boundary in a non-Western context.

In terms of the order of presenting the eleven themes in Section 5.2, the analysis of the possession themes relating to the personal dimension of the self **(Theme 1 to Theme 4)** is located in Section 5.2.2. The analysis of possession themes that are linked to the relational dimension of the self **(Theme 5 to Theme 9)** is presented in Section 5.2.3. Finally, the analysis of possession themes that reflect the collective dimension of the self **(Theme 10 and Theme 11)** are illustrated in Section 5.2.4.

Next, I will examine informants' possession acquisition (i.e. self-gifts, gift-receipts, gift-giving and other objects) in order to investigate the self-possession boundary of informants in Section 5.3. First, I will examine self-gifts in Section 5.3.1 where informants bought items for themselves related to the dimensions of communication (Section 5.3.1.1), exchange (Section 5.3.1.2.) and specialness (Section 5.3.1.3.) of their important possessions. Second, I will

explore gifts-receipts that informants had received from others as part of their important possessions in section 5.3.2. Third, I will investigate gifts that informants had given to close others as part of their important possessions (i.e. the *extended possessions*) in Section 5.3.3. Finally, I will examine other objects that informants acquired through other sources (e.g. photos) and which they described as part of their important possessions in Section 5.3.4.

5.2. Eleven Possession Themes

5.2.1. The Process Underpinning the Analysis of the Possession Themes in the Narratives

People define and extend their selves through the use of possessions (Belk 1988). Narratives of 20 informants were first read as part of the cross-case analysis a number of times in order to identify patterns of emergent themes inductively, for example, personal history and achievement, enhancing and maintaining relationships with close others, and in-group membership. Then, secondly Brewer and Gardner's (1996) trichotomization analytical framework of the self (the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self) and existing literature related to possessions and gift-giving were used deductively in order to examine and conceptualize how informants make sense of themselves, reflecting the trichotomization of the self through their possession stories. It should be noted that this analytical process is iterative (Arnould & Epp 2006, Joy et al. 2006).

As suggested by Denzin (1989), I draw on theories and concepts from existing literature to further redefine and develop themes. When analysing the empirical data, the initial thematic coding were suggested by Richins's (1994a) meanings of possessions, and my analyses suggested refinements and additions in the light of the additional possession themes that reflect the relational dimension of the self. In particular, Richins's (1994a, 1994b) possession meanings relating to interpersonal ties were insufficient to explain (or capture) the essence of this study, as a large number of possession stories in this study are related to interpersonal

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ties. As a result, I incorporated two relational aspects ("strengthening" and "affirmation") (Themes 5 and 6, Table 5.1) from Ruth et al.'s (1999) study into my analysis of themes. I also used other theories from Schouten (1991), Myerhoff (1982), Mick and Demoss (1990a) when identifying and analysing other possession themes from the empirical data. Table 5.1 summarises the findings of eleven themes and source of possessions (i.e. self-possession boundaries) in this study.

Row 1	Dimensions of the Self (Brewer & Gardner 1996)*	Personal Dimension of the Self				Relational Dimension of the Self					Collective Dimension of the Self	
Row 2	Possession themes	Theme (1)	Theme (2)	Theme (3)	Theme (4)	Theme (5)	Theme (6)	Theme (7)	Theme (8)	Theme (9)	Theme (10)	Theme (11)
Row 3	Meanings of possessions	Self-expression	Achievement (e.g. trophy)	Symbolizes personal history	Utilitarian	Enhancing, strengthening & cultivating relationships with others	Affirmation relationship	Memories of the past with specific person(s)	Re-membering the deceased loved ones (Disconnected relationships)	Discontinued relationships – liminal stage (Disconnected relationships)	Status – represents social prestige value a social status	In-group membership
Row 4	Description of themes	(1) Individuality, (2) Symbols for personal skills, creative experience, capabilities, and future goals	Personal achievement and success	(1) Personal history links a unique life stage in the past (2) Identity negotiation between the past self and the present self	(1) Instrumental (2) Reference to investment or financial security (3) Enjoyment	Adding new shared meanings to strengthen the relationships	Adding new shared meanings to reproduce familial or friendship intimacy	Recalling memories of their interpersonal ties in the past	Building a "new" relationships with the deceased loved ones	Self negotiation between the lost self and the new self	Enhancing their social status	Signifying in-group characteristics
Row 5	Source of Possessions (i.e. self-possession boundaries)	Self-gift or other objects	Self-gift or other objects	Gift-receiving, self-gift or other objects	Self-gift or gift-giving	Gift-giving, Gift-receiving, or other objects	Gift-giving, Gift-receiving, or other objects	Self-gifts, Gift-giving, Gift-receiving or other objects	Gift-receiving or other objects	Gift-receiving or other objects	Self-gift	Self-gift
Row 6	References	Richins (1994), Dittmar (1991)	Richins (1994), Dittmar (1991)	Richins (1994), Dittmar (1991)	Richins (1994), Dittmar (1991)	Ruth et al (1999)	Ruth et al (1999)	Kleine et al (1995), Belk (1988, 1991), Schultz et al (1989)	Myerhoff (1982)	Schouten (1991)	Richins (1994), Mick & Demoss (1990a)	Tse (1996) Mick & Demoss (1990a)

Table 5.1: Summary of the Findings (Possession Themes, the Trichotomization of the Self and Self-Possession Boundaries) from the Empirical Data

Rows 2 – 5 are emergent possession meanings from the empirical data.

*The matrix maps possession themes (Rows 2 – 5) onto the framework of self (Row 1) derived from Brewer and Gardner's (1996) trichotomization of the self.

Possessions carry functional and symbolic meanings (Hogg 1998, Dittmar 1989). In the present study, informants tended to focus more on the symbolic meanings of their important possessions in their narratives, reflecting different dimensions of the self (the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self). People use possessions as symbols to form their identity, to connect with significant others, and to take part in a larger group of a society (Schultz et al. 1989, Grubb and Grathwohl 1967, Levy 1959).

Eleven themes linked to the meanings of possessions emerged from my cross-case analysis through the iterative inductive and deductive analytical approach. These themes will be discussed under the trichotomization analytical framework of the self (Brewer and Gardner 1996): the personal, relational and the collective dimensions of the self. It should be noted that some of informants' stories about their important possessions contained multiple themes in different combinations. The first four themes (Themes 1 – 4) in Section 5.2.2 are related to the personal dimension of the self. Themes 5 – 9 in Section 5.2.3 are linked to the relational dimension of the self and Themes 10 – 11 in Section 5.2.4 are associated with the collective dimension of the self.

5.2.2. Possession Meanings within the Personal Dimension of the Self (Themes 1 – 4)

The personal dimension of the self (Themes 1 – 4) focuses on informants who narrated possession stories revealing their individualistic characteristics. Possessions reflect people's selves by linking them to their *self-expression* (e.g. symbols for personal skills, capabilities and creative experience) (Theme 1) (Richins 1994a, 1994b, Dittmar 1991, Kleine et al 1995), *personal achievements* (Theme 2) (Richins 1994a, 1994b, Dittmar 1991, Schultz et al 1989) *personal history* (Theme 3) (Richins 1994a, 1994b, Dittmar 1991, Wallendorf and Arnould 1988) and *utilitarian needs* (e.g. instrumental, enjoyment, financial security and appearance-related aspects) (Theme 4) (Richins 1994a, 1994b, Dittmar 1991). These possessions

symbolize a special period in informants' lives and helped them define who they were in past and who the are at present (Areni et al. 1998). Belk (1991b: 116) notes "without a demonstrable past, without the ability to remember where we have been, without some proof of our history, we don't know who we are and cannot forecast or plan where we're going".

5.2.2.1 Theme 1: Self-expression

Possessions symbolize informants' individuality and self-expression in terms of their personal skills, capabilities and creative experience (Belk 1988, Richins 1994a) reflecting their personal dimension of the self. For example, Rico's story about his important possession of a video tape in a singing competition signified his talent in music and revealed his personal dimension of the self. This video captured and recorded the best moment of his past life (his past self) performing singing on the stage in high school in the past and motivated Rico to pursue his career in the entertainment or related industry, e.g. working at the radio station (his present personal self at work). Rico felt that he was one step closer to his dream of becoming a DJ one day, projecting his future personal self.

Ada's story about her school magazine signified her creativity and represented her hard work as an editor in creating the magazine from scratch. This valuable experience shaped who she is at present and who she will be in the future. Every time when she has faced difficulties at work, she has encouraged herself not to give up by reminding herself of the experience of producing her school magazine. In addition, Edward narrated stories about his musical instruments and CDs to express his individuality as a musician. Edward's story about his piano and electric guitar not only revealed his musical talent and creative skills but also explained how these skills and interest in music helped shape him into who he is at present (e.g. a music director).

5.2.2.2. Theme 2: Personal Achievements

Possessions are like testimonies that mark informants' personal achievements and reveal the personal dimension of the self. According to informants' narratives, personal achievement includes being recognised by others, getting their first salaries or first job, achieving their sales target, or being a champion in a competition, etc.

Rico narrated a possession story about an academic prize (i.e. a writing mat) he had received when he was in primary school. Rico considered himself to be a poor pupil in terms of academic performance and he believed he only had talent for sports and singing in school. It was the first time and the only time he received recognition of his academic performance in a subject called integrated science. Rico regarded this as one of the most memorable personal achievements in his life. Similarly, Mark's story about his first Timex watch signified his sports self and marked his golden period of being a triathlon athlete in his sports life.

Danni considered a watch as her important possession because it marked her rite of passage – the first salary in her life. She had a sense of independence from the achievement of being able to earn her own living. Danni had the freedom to buy what she wanted and therefore she bought a watch to celebrate that particular moment in her life.

Informants used possessions not only to signify their personal achievements but also to differentiate themselves from others by emphasizing their individuality, achievements and uniqueness (Schultz et al. 1989). "Individuals with a high consumer need for uniqueness would more often engage in the consumption of products for purposes of classification rather than experiences, integration or play" (Tian et al. 2001: 55). Sam bought an expensive branded pen for daily use at work to celebrate his first job as a medical officer in a hospital. He did not want to buy an expensive branded pen (e.g. Mont Blanc) that everybody else had.

Instead, he bought a Dunhill pen that he thought he could use to differentiate himself from the common crowd.

5.2.2.3. Theme 3: Personal History

Informants had possessions that were linked to their personal history that had had an impact on their lives (who they were) in the past, shaped who they are at present, and possibly projected who they would like to be in the future. Winston's story of his childhood toys revealed his interest in learning. Although he currently works for the government with a stable income, he is not satisfied with his job (his present undesired self at work). Narrating stories about his childhood toys reminded him of his passion to follow his dream to become a photographer, taking photos around the world (his desired future self at work).

Peter's stories about his Swatch collection and holidays in Canada signified the happy memories in his personal history. He was independent, earning an adequate income to enjoy life, and was able to purchase things he had always wanted. This is in comparison to his current situation, as Peter is now struggling to achieve a stable income from his current job to pay for his mortgage. Similar to Peter, Paul had quite a few stories (Faye Wong CDs, a Guess jumper, a Swatch watch) that bore witness to different stages in his life as a young carefree man. Each important possession represented a special period in that particular life stage.

Jake had an Oris watch that he carefully preserves and would like to pass on to the next generation. This watch signified how Jake conquered his difficulties during his time studying for his undergraduate degree in Australia and signified his past self as a poor student. His past experiences helped shape who he is in the present and project who he will be in the future. When facing difficulties in life, he would recall his experiences in Australia in order to encourage himself to pursue his dreams and not to give up. Similarly, Ada told a story about the songs that she had listened to while studying at Harvard as among her important

possessions. Those songs reminded her of the good time she had when she was a student there. Those songs not only reminded her of the good time in the past but also motivated her to work hard in the present time while writing essays for her law degree.

Some informants revealed that they were in the process of negotiating their identities between letting go of their past personal self and accepting their present personal self in their possession stories (Schouten 1991). Mark's stories about his second Timex watch (White Ironman) captured his identity negotiation between being a serious sportsman and a "salary man". He described when he lost his first Timex Ironman in 1989, his past personal self as a serious sportsman was fading away and he accepted the reality that he was a "salary man". Then, Mark was not satisfied with being just a "salary man" and wanted to re-ignite his passion in sports by buying himself another training watch, White Ironman. His narratives about these two training watches demonstrate his personal negotiation between being a sportsman and being a "salary man".

Andrew's story about his first house, that he no longer owned, revealed his identity negotiation between his past identity as a PE teacher and his present identity as a theology student. The house symbolizes two different dimensions of Andrew's selves, i.e. his past materialistic self and his present spiritual self on the personal dimension as a dedicated Christian, and his relational self as a loving husband to his wife. The act of selling the house has significant symbolic meanings for him and he disconnected himself from his old materialistic self and connected his present self to being a spiritual theology student.

5.2.2.4. Theme 4: Utilitarian Aspects

Possessions have multi-faceted dimensions that provide different degrees of instrumental and symbolic meanings and functions, reflecting informants' sense of the self. The instrumental

aspects of possessions are related to the actual use and function of the possessions in order to help people gain control over the environment and provide benefits for the user, e.g. cars, tools, appliances, etc. As Prentice (1987) described that "the instrumental objects, such as a spear or an automobile, because these possessions are tools that they can use to affect and control the environment".

Utilitarian aspects of important possessions include financial security, enjoyment and appearance revealing informants' personal dimension of the self. Possessions can carry both instrumental meanings as well as symbolic meanings in representing people's sense of identity (Dittmar 1989). In this study, some informants revealed both instrumental and symbolic meanings in their narratives abot their important possessions.

May's story about her Rolex watch not only has the culturally shared meanings of an expensive branded prestige watch, but also consisted of May and her husband's special idiosyncratic sharing of symbolic meanings that indicated their close relationship (Montgomery 1988, Ruth et al. 1999). For May, the Rolex watch not only contains the symbolic meanings of her husband's love, but also has an instrumental reference to investment value and financial security (e.g. jewelleries or stocks) (Dittmar 1991, Richins 1994b). Hong Kong consumers' perception of buying Rolex watches is viewed as a means of investment and security so May emphasized the investment value of Rolex as high as gold and diamonds.

Edward's story was about his cassette tape that provided him with enjoyment in listening to music. He felt the emotion (i.e. happiness and sadness) through listening to music. His enjoyment in music soon became a passion that drove him to become a musician in his career path into adulthood. Mark told the story about how his old worn-out training T-shirts revealed his personal sports self *"the purpose of participating in a competition"* in the past.

His appearance as a sportsman at that time was *"more simple"* and *"very basic"* focusing only on his training. Compared with his old sports appearance, his current sports appearance tends to emphasize matching training shirts and shoes. His old training shirts served more functional and utilitarian purposes in the past whereas his present training shirts are more related to appearance aspects.

Peter has specific watches to wear on different occasions, thus catering for different functions and purposes. Peter is a Swatch collector and would never wear his precious Swatch watches at work. Instead, Peter would wear Casio watches at work in construction sites and believed Casio watches are robust and durable for him to wear while he is working on construction sites. Similar to Peter, Shirley has different watches to cater for her needs at work and at leisure. She has a Titus watch that matches her appearance as a flight attendant at work and wears her Swatch watch when she exercises or wears something sporty.

5.2.3. Possession Themes within the Relational Dimension of the Self (Themes 5 – 9):

Most of the informants' stories about their important possessions are related to the relational dimension of the self in this study. In a Chinese context, views of the self in a social context carry very different meanings from those in the West, because social relationships and roles form the core of the Chinese self-concept (Hsu 1971). Possessions create different layers of symbolic social ties to a whole range of people. In addition, informants have possessions that are not only related to significant others in existing and on-going relationships, but also referred to significant others in lost or abandoned and thus disconnected relationships (e.g. past romantic partners and deceased family members).

The meanings of informants' important possessions signify how informants built, maintained and enhanced their interpersonal relationships with significant others, reflecting the relational dimension of the self. In this section, I will first examine informants' stories about informants'

important possessions that enhanced, strengthened and affirmed their relationships with their current romantic/ marital partners parents, siblings or friends in both existing on-going relationships and lost or abandoned past (thus disconnected) relationships (Theme 5, Theme 6 and Theme 7). Then I will explore informants' stories about their important possessions that signified their strategies of redefining a "new" self through a "new" relationship (re-membering) with their lost loved ones (Theme 8) and negotiation between different selves in a liminal stage (Theme 9) in their disconnected relationships.

5.2.3.1. Theme 5: Enhancing, Strengthening & Cultivating Relationships with Significant Others

Most of the informants narrated stories about important possessions that were related to their romantic or marital partners in their current existing relationships, revealing their relational dimension of the self. The meanings of important possessions related to their romantic or marital partners tended to symbolise their special history from the past and the longing for a promising future together, as they sought to strengthen their existing interpersonal relationships (Andersen 1993).

Alan wanted to please his then-girlfriend now-wife, Yuan in their dating stage through giving her different objects (e.g. a pair of old lover watches, a birthday watch, a diamond necklace and a music box). Although these objects do not belong to Alan, psychologically he felt that he owned them and regarded them as part of his own important possessions (i.e. the *extended possessions*) linked to his extended self. Each possession signalled their "new-and improved relationship" (Ruth et al. 1999: 388). These possessions not only enhanced their relationship in the past but also built up new shared meanings together as their relationship continues. Over time, the meanings of each possession become idiosyncratic, singular and irreplaceable with intertwined layers of meanings as these gifts gradually take on "patina" (McCracken 1990).

Similar to Alan, Jake spent time and money queuing up for a limited edition Valentine's Swatch for Shirley. He seized the special occasion of Valentine's Day to deliver his affection through a tangible object *"It's Valentine's Day and the watch says it all"* (Sherry 1983). This possession served as having a strengthening relational effect at that dating stage and the symbolic and emotional meanings of this important object evolved as their romantic relationship developed (Ruth et al. 1999). They both carefully cultivated this romantic relationship and wanted to commit to one another in marriage.

In addition, almost all of Winston's important possessions are related to this theme of enhancing, strengthening and cultivating relationships with his wife, Lucy. At the beginning of the dating stage, Winston received a birthday watch from Lucy. Then they were separated because Winston needed to pursue his studies in the UK. Winston bought a teddy bear to reassure Lucy of his love for her. The relationship became stable when he came back to Hong Kong after he had finished his undergraduate studies. They bought a pair of "Everlasting love" watches together. Finally, Lucy bought a Blue Angel Casio watch on their wedding day to celebrate the new chapter in their life. All these possessions marked different life events in Winston's life as what Denzin (1989: 23) called "epiphanies – turning points" that shaped his life.

Renay and May have similar stories of important possessions that marked different life stages in their lives with their romantic partners. Renay had a "moon-and-the-sun" watch that she had received from her then-boyfriend, Joe in their early dating stage and later an engagement watch when they had become engaged. May also has received a Seiko watch from her then-boyfriend and now-husband, Roy to mark their dating period. This watch not only marked their life stages as a dating couple but also bore witness to how they had built their family together. Roy used more than half of his first salary to buy May this Seiko watch. She has

been using it ever since. May also regarded their wedding album as one of her important possessions. With a tight budget, Roy let May choose her favourite but expensive dress so that she could have a memorable wedding. However, "these feelings of commitment and mutuality are not limited to romantic partners" (Ruth et al. 1999: 389). May bought an "Everlasting Love" watch for one of her friends sending a message of appreciation and of her desire to elevate their friendship. May has a close relationship with her friend and hoped that this friendship would last *"forever"*.

5.2.3.2. Theme 6: Affirming Relationships – Adding New Shared Meanings to Reproduce Familial or Friendship Intimacy

Apart from strengthening and cultivating relationships with significant others, many informants also told stories about their important possessions that related to family members and friends, reflecting the relational dimension of the self. The difference between strengthening experiences and affirming experiences is that affirming experiences "… do not elevate the relationship to a higher plane but rather reproduce friendship bonds and familial intimacy" (Ruth et al. 1999: 390).

Andrew and Renay received watches as affirming recognition from their fathers (Ruth et al. 1999). Affirming recognition refers to objects that mark their rite of passage in life (e.g. reaching adulthood) in this case signifying their familial relationships with their fathers. "A recipient achieves an important milestone and the internal importance of the occasion is mirrored in the external recognition encapsulated in the gift experience" (Ruth et al. 1999: 392). These possessions are important to informants, as they have built additional idiosyncratic shared meanings into the possessions, which have enhanced and reproduced their familial intimacy.

In addition, Andrew received a licence plate from his father that he considered to be one of his important possessions. "Although affirming gifts are not necessarily luxurious items, they have a personal significance for either the recipient or the relationship" (Ruth et al. 1999: 390). The licence plate has two symbolic meanings for Andrew. First, it marked his father's success in business in the past and carried evidence of the family legacy. This gift represented the family's inalienable wealth and carried significant symbolic meanings for Andrew (Curasi et al. 2004). The second symbolic meaning of the licence plate is a special familial link between Andrew and his father. Andrew was an illegitimate child in the family as his mother was his father's mistress. Andrew was not allowed to live with the family until he was a teenager. Receiving this licence plate from his father was a sign of assurance from his father. The recognition and love from his father meant a great deal to Andrew, indicating their close relationship (Montgomery 1988, Ruth et al. 1999).

Similar to Andrew, Rico received a Casio G-shock watch from his mother that reminded him of his stormy relationship with his mother in the past and signified his improving relationship with his mother in the present. Although Rico did not like the style of the watch, he valued the thought that his mother had tried her best to maintain their relationship and he did not mind wearing it as a sign of his appreciation for his mother's care.

5.2.3.3. Theme 7: Memories of the Past with Significant Others in both Disconnected Relationships and Existing On-going Relationships

Possessions that carry a sense of the past self help people narrate the stability and development of changes in self in their life stories (Kleine et al. 1995). The temporal orientation of self-continuity involves past selves that shape the present selves. Possessions are seen "as symbols of what we are, what we have been and what we are attempting to become" (Schultz et al. 1989, p. 359) and contain idiosyncratic memories for informants. Theme 7 refers to possessions that are linked to informants' memories of the past with their

close others in both disconnected and existing on-going relationships, revealing the relational dimension of their self.

In terms of disconnected relationships with significant others, Peter and Rico shared their stories about their important possessions that were related to their family members who had passed away. Peter told a story about a Rolex watch that had belonged to his deceased father with whom he had had a detached relationship. He felt resentful toward his deceased father who did not provide him with a better living for the family. Although this watch is regarded as an important item for Peter, there was not that much emotion attached to this possession. Peter kept the watch for the sake of the memories that were linked to his past affiliated relational self as a son to his father. "You grieve the loss of something that makes you who you are" (Gentry et al. 1995: 68).

In addition, Rico also had a story about a "limited teeth-marked" watch that was given by his deceased loved one, his fifth uncle in the past. His deceased uncle was like a parental figure for Rico as he spent a lot of time playing with Rico when he was a child. Rico is thankful for that wonderful and memorable childhood. The memories of "teeth-marked limited" watch signified their close relationship. Although his uncle passed away (a sense of lost self), these happy memories were revived as Rico retold the story.

Some possessions that carry good memories in the past may provide bittersweet feelings in the present due to disconnected relationships. Ann and Iris told their stories that revealed their memories of their disconnected/ abandoned relationships, revealing their relational dimension of the self. Ann had a story that was related to her disconnected romantic relationship with her ex-husband, signifying her loss of part of her relational self. Ann bought a watch for her ex-husband on their wedding day. However, Ann felt bitter that her ex-husband never wore it as if he had never appreciated it. Similar to Ann, Iris had a scarf that

linked her to her past relational self with her first French boyfriend, Ah Long. Retelling the stories of Ah Long brought back her sweet and bitter memories from the past and helped her console herself with the thought that she had had a good time with Ah Long. Iris ended the relationship because of her family responsibility as she could not leave Hong Kong for him. Iris still missed him although the relationship ended a long time ago. Wearing the scarf in the present time signifies the importance of Ah Long in her heart.

In terms of memories of the past with significant others in existing relationships, Shirley shared her story of a diamond pendant cross from Jake. The memory of an incident of rescuing the pendant from the sink together made them realize that it is always better to solve problems together as a couple. The pendant cross not only carried the original memory of the baptism event but also had had the idiosyncratic experientially-derived meaning added to it. The symbolic and emotional meanings and values of the possession were enhanced through interactions (Richins 1994a). All these memories reinforced Shirley's relationship with Jake, reflecting the relational dimension of her self.

5.2.3.4. Theme 8: Re-membering the Deceased Loved Ones

Informants reflected different aspects of the relational dimension of their self in their possession stories from existing on-going relationships compared with disconnected relationships. In the disconnected relationships with significant others (or animals) caused by death, informants used a strategy of "re-membering" to include their deceased loved one in their own daily lives. Myerhoff (1982) suggested the term re-membering to describe how people redefine their relationships with the deceased loved ones and include them in their lives although the "tangible" or "physical" relationships with the deceased loved ones no longer exist. Using a strategy of "re-membering", informants are able to redefine their "new" self from their loss of self through rebuilding a "new" relationship with the lost loved ones.

Both Renay and Peter narrated possession stories about their deceased parents revealing the relational dimension of the self. Although the "physical" relationships are disconnected, both of them tried to keep these special relationships alive on a different level.

Renay's father passed away 15 years ago. However, she still feels very close to her father every time she touches her father's horse-shaped jade. Her father used to carry this horse-shaped jade in his pocket. Renay inherited it and regards it as one of her important possessions. Although her father caused a lot of pain in the family (e.g. affairs), Renay chose to remember the good memories of her happy childhood with her father. The horse shape jade symbolizes her father's presence and had a sacred meaning for Renay, connecting her to her father (Belk et al. 1989). *"I just took it out yesterday and touched it"*.

Peter's mother passed away 9 years ago. Peter has mixed emotions about his deceased mother and thinks about his deceased mother constantly, e.g. in his dreams, from the smell of a neighbour's cooking stir fry in the corridor, or from watching a film. He keeps his relationship with his deceased mother alive and connects to her on a different level. When Peter misses his deceased mother, he would take out the sweater that his mother had knitted for him in order to feel her presence. In addition, Peter told another story about a film called Sixth Sense that reminded him of his regret and pain. This possession is painful, like taboos that he tries to avoid (Gentry et al. 1995). When he saw that film, he cried because he felt his mother's presence.

Cherishing possessions that are linked to their deceased parents shows the importance of their deceased parents in their hearts, revealing their relational dimension of the self. In these disconnected relationships, Renay and Peter used a strategy of "re-membering" their parents on a different level (Myerhoff 1982). "The parent may be dead, but the relationship did not

die" (Silverman and Nickman 1993: 315). Over time, they learned how to find a way to include their parents in their lives (Nasim 2007).

In addition, "re-membering" deceased loved ones is not limited to people only. Some people treat their pets as one of their family members (Belk 1988). Ann narrated her story about her important possessions that were linked to her deceased cat, Mike, from a scuba diving watch, to Mike's toys, brush, hair and even his DNA. She tried the best she could to keep her deceased cat alive in her life. For example, Ann has a worn-out scuba diving watch that is imprinted with the marks that Mike's teeth left after chewing the strap. She has put it in a safe place to avoid any further damage. The watch has become a sacred object for her. From time to time, Ann will take it out to have a look at it when she misses him. Ann also carries Mike's hair almost every day in her bag as if Mike was still around. Keeping Mike's DNA is another strategy to "re-member" him in her life. Ann hopes that state-of-the-art technology some day will be able to clone another Mike from his DNA.

5.2.3.5 Theme 9: Negotiating Identities in Lost or Abandoned and thus Discontinued Relationships in a Liminal Stage

Some informants revealed that they were in the process of negotiating identities in a liminal stage in their possession stories, reflecting their relational dimension of the self. In lost or abandoned and thus disconnected or discontinued relationships with deceased loved ones or past romantic partners, some informants often found themselves facing dialectic tensions in their narratives (Young 1991, McAlexander 1991) about these possessions, the liminal phase. "Liminal people are betwixt and between two life stages or social roles" (Gentry et al. 1995: 68) with a sense of confusion of their ambiguous social status or roles. As Murphy et al. (1988) noted that the liminal stage is "declassified but not yet reclassified; they have died in their old status and are not reborn in a new one" (p. 237).

Peter narrated a story about his important possession linking to his relational dimension of the self: a blanket mended by his deceased mother, that he had recently disposed of and which signified the dialectic tension in his narrative of letting go of some of the possessions that had belonged to his deceased mother. Peter is still in the liminal stage between the past self (a mother's son) to the present self (a deceased mother's son). The liminality is "the traumatic confusion experienced as one goes through the transition rite of passage while reconciling the loss of a loved one" (Gentry et al. 1995: 68). As time went by, he started to find the courage to look at some of the possessions that reminded him of his deceased mother. It has been 9 years and he is still learning how to let go of some of the emotion by disposing of one of his precious items. His disposition of the blanket is a step that he takes in order to try to redefine his new self as his deceased mother's son.

In terms of lost or abandoned and thus disconnected relationships with past romantic/ marital partners, people in general who did not take the initiative in the divorce proceedings tend to hold on to possessions or gifts that are related to their partners as if they are still holding on to the relationships (McAlexander 1991). Informants were often in the stages of role-identity development between identity disposition, identity discovery and identity construction (Kleine et al. 2005). The negotiation process of letting go of some and keeping hold of other things amongst their meaningful possessions helped them cope with the loss and adjust to the changes experienced in this liminal phase of life transition. As they moved from disposing of their past identity (e.g. as a married person) to acquiring a new identity (e.g. as a divorcee), they give new emotional and symbolic meanings to their important possessions (Schouten, 1991).

Kate's stories about the possessions that she received as gifts from her then-husband captured the dialectic tension in her negotiation between her lost self in her past romantic relationship

and her present self as a divorcee, revealing her relational dimension of the self. Kate held on to the possession in the process of identity reconstruction and her narrative captures the dialectal tension experienced as a divorcee within her identity role project. By narrating her story of her important possessions, Kate realized that she was still in a liminal stage between her lost past self as a married woman and her present self as a divorcee. The strategy of holding on to her important possessions that she had received from John, her ex-husband implies that Kate is still in the liminal phase, that she is in "a limbo between the past state (i.e. a married woman) to the current one (i.e. a divorcee)" (Schouten 1991: 421). Kate is in the process of identity reconstruction and her narrative captures the dialectic tension experienced as a divorcee within her identity role project. The negotiation process of letting go (e.g. returning all her wedding albums to John) of some things whilst keeping hold of other things amongst their meaningful possessions often helped them cope with loss and to adjust to change in this liminal phase of life transitions *"I miss him. I guess he has become another person. Let bygones be bygones"*.

5.2.4. Possession Themes within the Collective Dimension of the Self (Themes 10 – 11)

Very few informants' stories (only four stories) about important possessions are related to the collective dimension of the self. Most of them (e.g. Sam's story of his BMW, Ada's story of her Rolex, and Paul's story of his desired Ball watch) have both revealed the personal dimension of the self (e.g. achievement) and the collective dimension of the self (e.g. social status and/ or in-group membership). In other words, the collective dimension of the self played a relatively small part in these informants' possession stories.

All the informants' important possessions that reflect the collective dimension of their self are branded items. People tend to use branded items to signify their social status and to distinguish themselves from out-groups (Tse 1996). "Face" involves an individual's

perception of social feedback on his/her self-presentation" (Yau et al. 1999: 98). For Chinese consumers, branded products function as important social instruments which can signify an in-group social identity linked to peers of similar social status; and at the same time can signal increased distance from other groups, to which they do not want to belong (Tse 1996). Symbolically, conspicuous consumption of luxury goods encodes people's social status and reinforces their in-group membership.

5.2.4.1. Theme 10: Social Status

Some informants regarded objects as their important possessions because they believed these objects signify or possibly improve their social status reflecting the collective dimension of their self. These possessions tended to be branded and relatively expensive items. Sam told a story about his first BMW car as one of his most important possessions. He bought the car to celebrate his personal achievement as a doctor, linking to his personal dimension of the self, an aspiration status or ideal self that he had longed for. Then, Sam talked about the pleasure and happiness he felt when driving his BMW because it represented his in-group membership of the medical community, signalling group affiliation on the collective dimension self. For Sam, the car, signified in-group membership (Theme 11) with his colleagues as most of them drove the same brand of car, as well as the social status (Theme 10) (Tse et al. 1994).

5.2.4.2. Theme 11: In-group Membership

Chinese consumers potentially pay more attention to branded products and special possessions because these material goods represent a primary basis for establishing social distinctions between in-groups and out-groups (Tse et al. 1994) linking to their collective dimension of the self. Ada wears her Rolex watch often as she believes her watch is congruent with her self-image, i.e. *"practical and simple... not flashy"* (Sirgy 1982) revealing her personal dimension of the self. More importantly, she could be sure that she would not

lose face in a group when wearing her Rolex for any occasion. Her story about her Rolex explains how she looks at herself with reference to her in-group, i.e. her collective self. Ada used to work for a well-known consulting company and she had to dress smartly for work. She found it necessary to portray her self as a professional at work by wearing certain brands of products.

Andrew told a story about some Swatch watches he had bought when he was at secondary school, revealing his past collective self. It was an in-group members' norm that they all wore Swatch and competed with one another in terms of the number of Swatch watches they had. In search of his identity during his adolescence, Andrew wanted to fit in and be recognised by his in-group at secondary school. These watches represented his special life stage in the past. In addition, Paul regarded a Ball watch, his desired watch that he would like to purchase in the future, as one of his important possessions. He explained that most of his university friends have bought this brand and he believed this Ball watch would be congruent with his self-image (Sirgy 1982) *"… a personal statement… to represent myself… matches my status"* linking to his personal dimension of the self. On the collective level, Paul wanted to be part of the group among his university friends wearing the same branded watch (in-group membership) (Tse 1996).

5.3. Self-Possession Boundaries: Possession Acquisition of Self-gifts, Gift-receipts, Gift-giving and Other Objects

Table 5.1 (Row 5) in this Chapter shows the sources of informants' possessions that they acquired through self-gift, gift-receipts, gift-giving and other objects. In this section, I will explore the self-possession boundary in the light of self-gifts in Section 5.3.1, gift-receipts in Section 5.3.2, gift-giving in Section 5.3.3 and other objects in Section 5.3.4.

5.3.1 Self-Gifts as Important Possessions

Gifts are often viewed as people's important or favourite possessions (Dittmar 1989, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, Richins 1994b, Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Unlike gift-exchange involving different people as givers and recipients, self-gifts are defined as "personally symbolic self-communication through special indulgences that tend to be premeditated a high context bound" (Mick and Demoss 1990a: 328). Self-gifts can be viewed along three dimensions: communication, exchange and specialness.

5.3.1.1 Communication Dimensions of Self-gift as Important Possessions

In the communication dimension, a consumer communicates and conveys messages between different selves (e.g. actual self to ideal self or work self to sports self) as a giver and a receiver at the same time (self-dialogue) ranging from congratulating one self to consoling another self. For example, Jake bought himself a Swatch watch that he only wears when he exercises or wears casual clothes. The watch symbolises his sports self and leisure self. Jake matches a clear distinction between his work self and sports self and uses different watches to differentiate them. In particular, Jake bought a Swatch watch for himself in order to signify his sports self or leisure self outside work. In addition, Rico bought a Seiko watch as a self-gift at the lowest moment in his life. Rico was in the process of redundancy and in serious debt. This watch signified a special life stage in his life and his hope in searching for his dream. Rico's Seiko watch serves as an encouragement in the communication dimension of self-gift.

Although most of the self-gifts are related to informants' personal dimension of the self, some self-gifts are linked to informants' relational dimension of the self. For example, Iris's story about her important possession, an Agfa watch, showed how she used a self-gift to console her actual self for being a single woman. The Agfa watch is a self-gift that Iris

bought for herself while she was travelling alone in Europe and it reminded her of the last time she had seen her ex-boyfriend, Ah Long "*Totally FULL stop*", "*It was the last time I met him*".. She bought a watch for herself as a souvenir during her trip in Europe. This watch also carries an extra meaning to remind her of the disconnected relationship with her ex-boyfriend from France. "Relationships require narrative to evoke the empathy and multilayered attention necessary for one person to have some sense of the nature of someone else's relationship experience" (Josselson et al. 2007: 4).

5.3.1.2. Exchange Dimensions of Self-gift as Important Possessions

Self-gifts in the exchange dimension can act as self-contracts that consumers use to justify their self-gift purchases or indulgences because they deserve them after all their hard work. To celebrate, they bought something as a reward to mark their achievement in that particular life stage.

Iris rewarded herself with a self-gift of a Citizen watch to celebrate her achievement in setting up a new cinema in a shopping mall. After losing pounds in weight and suffering from lack of sleep, the cinema was opened on time. Iris received a bonus from the company. To indulge herself after all the stress, she bought this Citizen watch to celebrate her success. Her self-gift serves the purpose of "relieving stress after an enduring or impinging event and having extra money to indulge oneself" (Mick and Demoss 1990a: 322). Similar to Iris, Edward took the risk of giving up his stable job in order to set up his own company. Edward put a lot of effort and hard work and in the end, Edward made some profit. To celebrate his success, he bought his first car, a Peugeot. As Edward made more profit from the company, he wanted to improve his living quality by buying a more expensive and prestigious car, a Lexus. Buying his dream car is his incentive to reward himself for his hard work in the exchange dimension of self-gift.

In addition, Shirley also showed how she justified her self-gift behaviour in the exchange dimension and regarded her self-gift (a Titus watch) as one of her important possessions revealing her personal dimension of the self. The watch not only symbolized her achievement in the past (Richins 1994b, Dittmar 1991) but also it is linked to her personal independent self at work. Shirley wears her watch at work, matching her image as a flight attendant. This watch is a self-gift because Shirley rewarded herself for her achievement of receiving her first salary. "Self-gifts act as self-contracts in which the reciprocity for the gift is also personal effort and achievement" (Mick and Demoss 1990a: 326).

5.3.1.3. Specialness Dimension of Self-gift as Important Possessions

Self-gifts also appear in the specialness dimension serving "the uncommonness, particularity, function or sacred aspects of self-gifts" (Mick and Demoss 1990a: 325). The extra meaningfulness of self-gifts appears in such themes as "perfect thing, escape, discovery and deserving". Paul and Fiona's stories will illustrate this dimension of self-gifts. For example, Paul's green Roots jumper contained idiosyncratic meanings that marked his special unforgettable memories while studying in Canada. It would be just an ordinary jumper in other people's eyes. However, for Paul, it had a sacred aspect that represented his life story (his personal history) of his *"worried"* but *"happy"* moment studying in Canada. (Belk et al. 1989). Paul had a tight budget and was constantly worried about running out of money in Canada. Even though he was poor *"I didn't even have money to take a driving test"*, he had a wonderful time studying in Canada.

In addition, Fiona narrated her story about the Christian Dior watch as a perfect thing that marked the debt free period in her life. Fiona at one point lost control of her spending and ended up in a serious debt. After consulting a bank to reconstruct the payments, she paid back all the debt and learned a new way of spending wisely. Fiona regained and reclaimed control

of her life, i.e. a new self - free from debt and she moved on with her life. In order to celebrate her new self and to mark her new stage, she bought a Christian Dior watch as a special self-gift to reward herself. This watch is a testimony to mark that particular special moment.

5.3.2. Gift-Receipts as Important Possessions

Gift-receipts are often regarded as part of people's important possessions "as a positive extension of self" (Belk 1988: 150). As Yang (1994) noted the importance of gift-giving in Chinese society as the "primacy and binding power of personal relationships and their importance in meeting the needs and desires of everyday life" (p. 6). Gifts play a substantial part in Chinese culture in terms of maintaining, harmonizing and enhancing interpersonal relationships in social systems (Wong & Ahuvia 1998, Belk and Coon 1993). The gift-giving serves to strengthen the relational effect in their existing on-going relationship as "gifts are ultimate signals to the recipient that the giver shares his desire to elevate the relationship to a higher plane... communicating this new and improved relationship" (Ruth et al. 1999: 387).

Chinese consumers often use gift-giving as a means to establish their webs of relationships and express implicit messages of their appreciation, affection and care for their close others (Wang et al. 2001). Kipnis (1997) noted the characteristic of Chinese gift-giving that "the closer the guanxi (relationships), the bigger the gift" (p. 67). The findings highlighted that the Chinese gift-giving behaviours are guided, to a certain extent, by a continuum of intimacy based on the Confucian hierarchy. This hierarchy serves to regulate interpersonal relationships in social networks with different levels of closeness varying from parents who are the closest, to siblings, marital partners, romantic partners, through to friends who are the least close. Romantic partners and close friends are seen as family members with "pseudo-kinship" relationships (Bedford and Hwang 2003). "Love one's parents who are the origin of

one's life first of all, then extend love to others in accordance with one's relationship (or degree of intimacy) with them" (Bedford and Hwang 2003: 132). The Confucian ethical system emphasizes "respecting the superior and favouring the intimate" (Hwang 1999: 170).

In line with the Confucian ethical system, Joy (2001) had a similar intimacy continuum in gift relationships from the closest relationship with parents to the least close relationship with acquaintances. In this section, I examine informants' stories about gift-receipts as their important possessions that are linked to their closest personal relationships along a continuum that moves through intimacy from parents, family members, marital/ current partners and finally to friends.

In line with the Western literature (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988, Richins 1994b, Schultz et al., 1989), Chinese informants, to a large extent, considered gift-receipts as part of their set of important possessions. In their relationships with their parents, informants told stories about gifts as important possessions that were mainly related to a special life stage in the past or in ongoing relationships with their parents. For example, Andrew received a gift of a licence plate from his father. Renay and Kate received gifts of watches from their fathers to celebrate their rite of passage.

The second closest intimacy on the continuum is linked to family members including siblings, cousins, aunties and uncles. For example, Lucy received a piano as gift from her *"big brother"* cousin as her one of her important possessions. The piano symbolizes her past self as a happy little girl being loved and cared by her *"big brother"* cousin. Shirley was given a birthday gift of a watch from her sister that she wears often in the present to signify their close bonding. In addition, Iris told a story about her pocket watch that was given to her by her "little uncle". The pocket watch symbolized her "little" uncle's care and their close relationship in the past

and represented her disconnected relationship with him due to a family dispute in the present. And Rico shared his story about a "limited edition of teeth-mark" watch from his deceased uncle and thanked him for all the good childhood memories.

Informants' stories about the gift-receipts from their romantic partners signified how their romantic relationships had evolved and strengthened as they moved from dating to marrying. Additional layers of symbolic and emotional meanings were built up through interactions (i.e. wearing or using it on different occasions) (Richins 1994a). For example, Sam received an Agnes B watch from his then-girlfriend and now-wife Ada as a gift. This gift has an extra layer of meaning as it marked a special moment in their relationship. This watch signified their love and reminded Sam of Ada's support during a dangerous and difficult moment, the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic outbreak in Hong Kong. In addition, Shirley received an engagement ring from Jake. This gift has strengthened and elevated their relationship from a dating couple to an engaged couple and marked a significant life stage.

5.3.3. Gift-giving to Significant Others as Important Possessions (the *Extended Possessions*)

Chinese consumers often use gift-giving as a means to establish their webs of relationships and express implicit messages about their appreciation of and affection for close others "a tangible demonstration of the richness and depth of the love the giver feels toward the recipient" (Belk 1996: 65). As Wang et al. (2001) noted "gift giving, instead of words and gestures, is used as a tangible statement of love and affection, which may explain that most Chinese feel obliged to give gifts since there are few other outlets for expression of love" (p. 61).

Informants in this study not only regarded gifts that they had received (gift-receipts) as among their important possessions but also considered gifts that they had *given* to significant others

as still constituting part of their own possessions. I suggest this categorization of gifts to others could be termed "the *extended possessions*". This extension aspect of important possessions has remained largely unexplored in earlier studies. Using Joy's (2001) intimacy continuum in gift relationships, the order of presenting stories about informants' *extended possessions* in this section is from the closest relationship with parents, family members, romantic/ marital partners to the least close relationship with acquaintances (e.g. friends).

"Because filial piety is enshrined in family relationships, children are forever indebted to their parents who gave them the ultimate gift – the gift of life" (Joy 2001: 252). Children are taught at an early age how to respect their parents and how it is their duty to support them when they are old (Yau 1988). According to informants' narratives, pleasing and satisfying parents by buying them expensive luxury goods was one of the ways to show their filial piety. Parents gain face by displaying their conspicuous goods to their friends, sending an implicit message "my daughter/ son bought this for me because s/he cares about me" (Joy 2001: 247). As Joy (2001) notes "The drive to save social face has imbued the gift with extraordinary social implications for the family, for it now has much more significance than when it was just a token" (p. 247). The symbolism of gifts is a powerful form of communication in Chinese society.

Pleasing parents by buying them expensive luxury goods was one of the ways to show their filial piety. Parents as gift-recipients gain face by displaying their conspicuous goods to their friends. For example, Shirley revealed that one of her important possessions was the gift of a Rolex watch that she had *given* to her mother. She showed her filial piety by spending a holiday with her mother, paying for her holiday trip and buying her a Rolex watch because "*I know she loves Rolex*". Although the watch did not belong to her, Shirley considered it to be one of her own important possessions (i.e. her *extended possession*). Similarly, Jake regarded

the gift of a Rolex watch that he had *given* his father in order to celebrate his father's 60th "big birthday as one of Jake's own important possessions (his *extended possession*).

Furthermore, Danni and Ann regarded gifts to their parents as amongst their own important possessions (the *extended possessions*). They noticed their parents' need and gave the items to their parents as gifts. These gifts are what Ruth et al. (1999) called empathetic gifts. "Empathetic gift experiences feature givers who act as providers, compensators, or both through presenting the recipient with new or replacement items that they truly need" (Ruth et al. 1999: 390). Danni's communication with her father is very implicit as her father is a traditional Chinese authority figure in the family. They seldom talked to each other. She noticed her father's watch was broken and bought a new Seiko watch for him, a tangible object to deliver an intangible message of care to her father.

Similar to Danni, Ann wanted to show her care and love to her mother by taking her to a shop to buy a "*decent*" watch because her mother's eyesight was getting worse so that she could not read the time clearly on her old watch. Ann felt guilty that she always made her mother anxious and wanted to thank her for everything she had done in the past. Ann believed that it was her responsibility to take care of her aging mother.

In terms of gifts that informants had given to family members, Iris regarded some gifts she bought at Disneyland for her cousin as among her important possessions (i.e. her *extended possessions*) and expressed her desire in building a close and strong relationship. Although the gifts belonged to her cousin, she considered these gifts as amongst her own possessions.

In addition, many informants spoke about important possessions that they still regarded as their own although these were gifts that they had *given* to their romantic/marital partners (i.e. the *extended possession*). The purpose of gift-giving is to build up, modify, maintain or

enhance an interpersonal relationship in a social network and represents an important social activity among Chinese people (Yau et al. 1999, Wong and Ahuvia 1998). The meanings of important extended possessions related to their romantic or marital partners and tended to symbolise the special history from the past and the longing for a promising future together, as they sought to strengthen their existing interpersonal relationships.

Some informants shared their stories about gifts to their romantic partners as one of their important possessions in terms of how they sacrificed their time in order to find a perfect gift (Mick and Demoss 1990a, Minowa and Gould 1999, Belk and Coon 1993). They revealed how much they wanted to please (Otnes et al. 1993) and to surprise (Areni et al. 1998) their romantic partners in their stories of important possessions.

For example, Alan described his meticulous planning on how to best surprise his then-girlfriend now-wife by investing time and money to buy a gift that she really liked. The stuffed toy rabbit marked their history together as a dating couple in the past and has become witness to how their loving relationship has grown as a married couple. Alan projected his love towards Yuan into the stuffed toy rabbit (Belk 1988). Over time, the meanings of the stuffed toy rabbit took on "patina" (McCracken 1990) and contained idiosyncratic and singular meanings.

Sam wanted to show the importance of Ada in his life and his desire to share his life with her by asking her to marry him. To show his appreciation and commitment, Sam sold his precious BMW car to generate more cash in order to buy a bigger nearly perfect diamond ring for Ada. Sam felt a sense of ownership towards the engagement ring as he had invested so much time and effort to prepare this gift and viewed it as his own important *extended possession* (Pierce et al. 2003).

In addition, friends are also regarded as part of the family in the Chinese concept of the self. The structure of the interdependent relational self is fluid; for example, "family" could expand to include close friends who become "like family" (Joy 2001: 239). In other words, the relationships with friends can be viewed as pseudo-kinship (Hwang 1999). Close friends can be important as they share a special bond and individuals lend support to one another. For example, May's narratives about her important possessions – a "Mickey Mouse Forever Friends" watch. May valued the friendship with her friend and gave a watch to her friend on her birthday sending an explicit message of "forever friends". She regarded this gift to her friend as one of her own important possessions (her *extended possession*) and used gift-giving to show her appreciation of their friendship (Wang et al. 2001).

5.3.4 Other Objects as Important Possessions

Apart from different types of gifts as informants' important possession, informants in this study also considered other objects that they acquired through other sources as among their important possessions (e.g. photos, magazines, wedding rings, music, songs, film etc). For example, Danni narrated her story about a photo as one of her important possessions. This photo marked her achievement of completing her undergraduate studies and reminded her of how she had won her father's approval. The photo was a sign of recognition that her father was proud of her on your graduation day. Making her father happy with a smile seems to make one of her achievements even more important than her other personal achievements. Danni values this photo so much that she carries it with her wherever she goes.

In addition, informants also considered objects that they no longer owned as their important possessions. Although informants did not have the possessions physically, they still valued the memories or experiences that the possessions brought to them. For example, Sam told a possession story about his stethoscope that he no longer owned. Although Sam did not have it

anymore, he considered it to be one of his important possessions because this stethoscope marked a special stage in his life as a medical student and made him who he is at present. Similarly, Andrew narrated a story about a watch that he no longer had. He received the watch from his then-girlfriend and now-wife a long time ago when they were in the dating stage. They used to wear them together in public in order to share their love and commitment. Although the watch was stolen, Andrew cherished that particular moment in their dating relationship and considered it as one of his important possessions.

Moreover, some informants regarded desired objects that they would most likely acquire in the future as among their important possessions. For example, Paul talked about people in his university peer group who wear the brand of watch that he would like to acquire in the future. Paul considered this future watch as one of his important possessions that signify his in-group membership among the university peer group.

May told a story about some small gold ornaments received as gifts for her son's baby shower. These ornaments did not belong to May. In fact, they actually belonged to her son. However, May considered them as part of her important possessions because these small gold ornaments signified her past affiliated relational self as a mother for a baby boy in the past, and her wish to get to know her teenage son better in the present. All these examples imply that Chinese consumers might have a wider boundary around possessions (i.e. what constitute their possessions). The discussion of self-possession boundary will be presented in Section 6.4 in Chapter 6 (Discussion Chapter).

5.4. Summary of Chapter 5

In this Chapter, I compared narratives across twenty informants in order to analyse common possession themes (Section 5.2) and self-possession boundaries (Section 5.3) in a non-

western context. Eleven themes that reflected the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self and sources of possessions were examined. In particular, possession meanings (Theme 5 – Theme 9) that are linked to the relational dimension of the self were prominent in informants' possession stories. In contrast, the collective dimension of the self plays an insignificant role in their stories. This leads to a question about how collective Chinese is as a society, as it is regularly characterised as collectivist in the literature (Hosfsted 1980).

The next chapter (Chapter 6) revolves around the discussion of the self (i.e. patterns of self-configurations of the trichotomization of the self based on the empirical findings) and possessions (i.e. a wider construction of the self-possession boundary incorporating the notion of *extended possessions* based on the empirical findings) in order to identify explicitly the contributions of this study. An extended theoretical framework beyond the empirical findings – the extended continuum of self-configurations of the trichotomization of the self – will be proposed as one of the theoretical contributions of this study.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This study draws upon a range of literature about the self, possessions and consumption. In the previous chapter (cross-case analysis), the self-possession boundary and eleven possession themes that emerged from the iterative analytical process were discussed. The contributions of this study are firstly I map out five patterns of self-configurations as the theoretical framework based on the empirical findings. Secondly I propose an extended theoretical framework of a continuum of self-configurations beyond the empirical findings. And finally I propose a notion of *extended possessions* within the self-possession boundary that extends Belk's (1988) concept of possessions and the extended self and is derived from my interpretation of the empirical findings.

In this chapter, I will discuss the following issues that revolve around the self, possessions and consumption.

1) Based on the empirical data, I map out five patterns of informants' self configuration of the personal, relational and collective selves (Figure 6.2). I therefore address Higgins and May's (2001) point that the trichotomization of the self (the personal, relational, collective dimensions of the self) that coexists within individual consumers remains unexplored "Although most theories of the self allow for the possibility that all three types of self-representation exist within the same person, the questions of how they coexist remains" (p. 48),

2) I further develop and propose an extended theoretical framework which moves beyond the empirical data: the continuum of self-configurations of the personal, relational, collective

dimensions of the self (Figure 6.4). This is one of the major contributions of my study and extends Brewer and Gardner's (1996) trichotomization of the self (Section 6.3).

3) I also argue that Chinese informants potentially have a wider construction of the self-possession boundary that incorporates the notion of *extended possessions*. Based on the empirical findings, I develop a theoretical framework about the self-possession boundary building upon Belk's (1988) concept of possessions in terms of the interrelationship between informants' construction of the self and their important possessions (Section 6.4),

4) I discuss the Chinese collectivist society and suggest a redefinition of how collectivism is interpreted in relation to the Chinese context (Section 6.5),

5) I discuss the emphasis on familial self in Chinese society (Section 6.6) in order to provide a better understanding on how the familial self plays a significant role in constructing the self in the Chinese society, and

6) I examine how the meanings of informants' possessions change over time (Section 6.7) in relation to individuals' identity project life cycle (Kleine and Kleine 2002) and place my findings within the context of *consumer identity projects* within consumer culture theory (CCT).

6.2 Mapping Out Patterns of Informants' Self-Configurations based on the Empirical Findings

In this thesis, I used an interpretivist approach in developing the research design and collecting data via interviews held in a naturalistic setting. Analysis was undertaken in two stages, firstly within-case analysis (Chapter 4); and secondly cross-case analysis (Chapter 5). In Chapter 4, I identified five patterns of self-configurations using the trichotomization analytical framework of the self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) and set out a rudimentary framework (Figure 4.1 in Chapter 4) to describe the phenomenon. However, how this trichotomization of the self (the dimensions of the personal, relational and collective self) coexists in each individual consumer's pattern of self-configuration was not discussed in Chapter 4. Therefore, I will conceptualise and refine the rudimentary framework of five patterns of self-configurations in this section.

In order to help to interpret the data and develop a theoretical framework, I adapted Aron et al.'s (1992) diagram to illustrate informants' patterns of self-configuration of the trichotomization of self. Aron et al.'s (1992) "inclusion of others in the self" consists of 7 patterns of two circles (self and others) that are adjacent to each other (i.e. two progressively overlapping circles) (see Figure 6.1) in order to indicate how people view their relationships with significant others and include significant others into their selves.
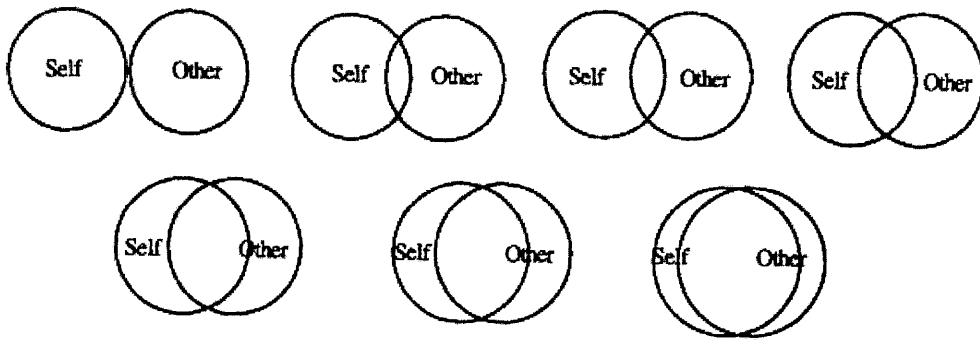
Figure 6.1: The Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale (Source: Aron et al. 1992: 597)

However, Aron et al.'s graphical representation of "inclusion of others in the self" has only seven patterns of two overlapping circles (self and others) which range from no overlap to largely overlapping (see Figure 6.1). Aron et al.'s (1992) representation was not sufficient to capture patterns of self-configuration across three dimensions (i.e. the personal, relational and collective) of the self as found in this study. In addition, Aron et al.'s (1992) graphical representation of two overlapping circles was originally developed based on Western data and does not readily represent the data found in the cultural context of Chinese consumers.

As a result, I synthesized Brewer and Gardner's trichotomization of the self (1996) and Aron et al.'s (1992) graphical overlapping circles of the self to develop a continuum which conceptualized the variety of self-configurations of the personal, relational and collective selves that I had found in my informants' stories (see Figure 6.2 & 6.3). Because Aron et al.'s pictorial representation of "Inclusion of others in the self" captures only the personal self and the relational self, I modified Aron et al.'s (1992) representation: I added a third circle, and I then synthesized Brewer and Gardner's (1996) trichotomization of the self (the personal, relational and collective self) into Aron et al.'s (1992) Venn diagram.

Based on the empirical findings, I mapped out five patterns of self-configuration of the personal, relational and collective selves (See Figure 6.2, Element 1 – 5). In Figure 6.2 –

Element 6.2.1, five informants (May, Renay, Kate, Ann and Alan) revealed only their relational dimension of the self in their possession stories and nothing in their stories related to the personal or collective dimension of their selves. In other words, the personal dimension of their self completely overlapped with the relational dimension of the self. The collective dimension of the self is absent (as represented in a lighter orange colour) in this configuration as they offered no stories that could be linked to the collective dimension of the self. This self-configuration can be categorised as the complete relational self-configuration (Element 6.2.1).

In Figure 6.2 – Element 6.2.2, the other seven informants' (Danni, Shirley, Lucy, Iris, Jake, Winston and Peter) relational dimension of the self overlapped largely with the personal dimension of the self in their possession stories. The collective dimension of the self is absent (as represented in a lighter orange colour) in this pattern as no informant revealed the collective dimension of the self in their possession stories in this category. This self-configuration can be categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration.

In Figure 6.2 – Element 6.2.3, only one informant (Rico) aligns with the category of the personal-relational equilibrium self-configuration as his stories showed that he largely placed an equal emphasis on the personal and relational selves in his stories. Rico told one story that revealed both the personal and relational dimensions of the self. He also had some stories that were related to the personal dimension of the self and some other stories that were linked to the relational dimension of the self. As Rico did not offer any stories linked to the collective dimension of his self, the collective dimension of the self remains absent (as represented in a lighter orange colour) from his self-configuration.

In Figure 6.2 – Element 6.2.4, three informants (Fiona, Mark and Edward) highlighted the personal dimensions of the self in their possession stories and told very few stories that revealed the relational dimensions of their self. As a result, their relational dimensions of the self only slightly overlap with their personal selves. The collective dimension of the self is absent (as represented in a lighter orange colour) in this figure as informants did not tell any stories relating to the collective dimension of the self. This self-configuration can be categorised as the personally-led self-configuration.

In Figure 6.2 – Element 6.2.5, four informants (Ada, Sam, Andrew and Paul) demonstrated all three dimensions of the self in their possession and consumption stories. This self-configuration can be categorised as the personal-relational-collective self-configuration. Although these dimensions of the self appeared in all these informants' narratives, they were not equally weighted. Most of the informants highlighted more of the personal dimension of their self than of the relational dimension of their self in their possession stories. The collective dimension of the self remains small in these stories.

Based on the empirical data, five patterns of self-configuration (see Figure 6.2, Elements 1 - 5) were potentially identified, i.e. the complete relational self-configuration (Element 6.2.1), the relationally-led self- configuration (Element 6.2.2), the personal-relational equilibrium self-configuration (Element 6.2.3), the personally-led self-configuration (Element 6.2.4) and the personal-relational-collective self-configuration (Element 6.2.5). Figure 6.2 summarises informants' patterns of self-configurations and Figure 6.3 provides descriptions of each configuration.

Figure 6.2: Five Patterns of Self-Configuration Emerged from the Data (P= personal self, R= relational self, C= collective self)

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6.3.1) The Complete Relational Self-Configuration

All possession stories are linked to the relational dimension of the self. The personal self is completely overlapped by the relational self in narratives of important possessions. The collective self is absent in this self-configuration as no story is linked to the collective dimension of the self.
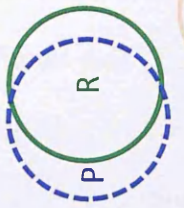
6.3.2) The Relationally-led Self-Configuration

The relational self overlaps largely with the personal self in possession stories. The collective self is absent from this self-configuration as no possession stories were linked to this dimension of the self.
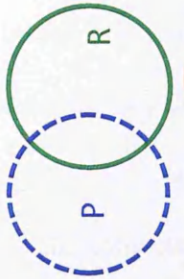
6.3.3) Personal-Relational Equilibrium Self-Configuration

There seems to be some degree of equalised balance between the personal and relational self in the possession stories. The collective self is absent from this self-configuration as no consumption stories were related to the collective self.
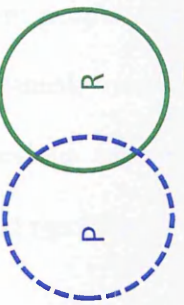
6.3.4) The Personally-led Self-Configuration

The personal self is strongly projected in the possession stories and the relational self only slightly overlaps with the personal self. The collective self is absent in this self-configuration as no possession story connects to the collective self.

6.3.5) The Personal-Relational-Collective Self-Configuration

All three dimensions of the self are included in the possession stories. Most of the informants emphasized more the personal self than the relational and collective self. The collective self remains very small in these informants' narratives.

Figure 6.3: Explanation of Five Patterns of Self-Configuration Emerged from the Data

P = Personal Dimension of the Self

R = Relational Dimension of the Self

C = Collective Dimension of the Self

6.3 Proposing an Extended Theoretical Framework: the Continuum of Self-Configurations beyond the Empirical Findings

This study is situated within CCT research (Consumer Culture Theory) exploring *consumer identity projects* and is in line with Kleine et al.'s (1991, 1993, 2005) studies of consumption and the self. Kleine et al. argue that the self is "a sense of who and what we are" (Kleine et al. 1995: 209) and is constructed within the social and cultural context. This study investigates how people from a Chinese cultural background constructed their sense of self on the personal, relational and collective dimensions through their possession stories. In the previous section, I identified five patterns of self-configurations based on the empirical findings (Figure 6.2).

In this section, I will move beyond theory building based solely on my empirical data (Figures 6.2 & 6.3) to a more extended proposal of how the continuum might work. An extended theoretical framework of a continuum of self-configurations (Figure 6.4) is proposed. An analogy might be drawn between this extended continuum and a periodic table. I would conjecture that there could be consumers in different cultural or societal contexts who would potentially represent additional and different patterns of self-configurations which might be in between the five patterns of self-configurations in the extended continuum (Figure 6.4). For example, people from individualistic societies that tend to place more emphasis on the personal dimension of their self might form relatively different patterns of self-configurations. Different patterns of self-configurations possibly exist in other contexts that could be explored in future research. The extended theoretical framework of a continuum of self-configurations provides an additional insight to earlier literature (Markus and Kitayama 1991, Brewer and Gardner 1996, Aaker and Lee 2001, Escalas and Bettman 2005)

and allows researchers to examine various self-configuration patterns of people's personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self in different contexts in future research.

Figure 6.4 is the extended theoretical framework of a continuum of self-configurations which moves beyond the empirical findings. As Figure 6.4 shows, Configuration 1 is located at one end of the continuum representing the complete inclusion of others (the relational dimension of the self) and in-groups (the collective dimension of the self) in the self (the personal dimension of the self). Configuration 3 is situated at the other end of the continuum indicating there is no overlapping between the self, others (the relational dimension of the self) and in-groups (the collective dimension of the self) at all. Configuration 2 shows that the self, to a certain extent, includes others (the relational dimension of the self) and/ or in-groups (the collective dimension of the self).

Different degrees of inclusion and patterns of self-configurations appear in Configuration 2. It should be noted that based on the empirical data, I identified 5 patterns of self-configurations (as outlined in the previous section – Figure 6.2) in this study. These five patterns of self-configurations are categorized as some of the patterns in Configuration 2 (Figure 6.5).

Configuration 1:

Complete inclusion of relational & collective dimensions within the personal self

Configuration 2:

Some inclusion of relational and/ or collective dimensions within the personal self

Configuration 3:

No inclusion of relational & collective selves within the personal self
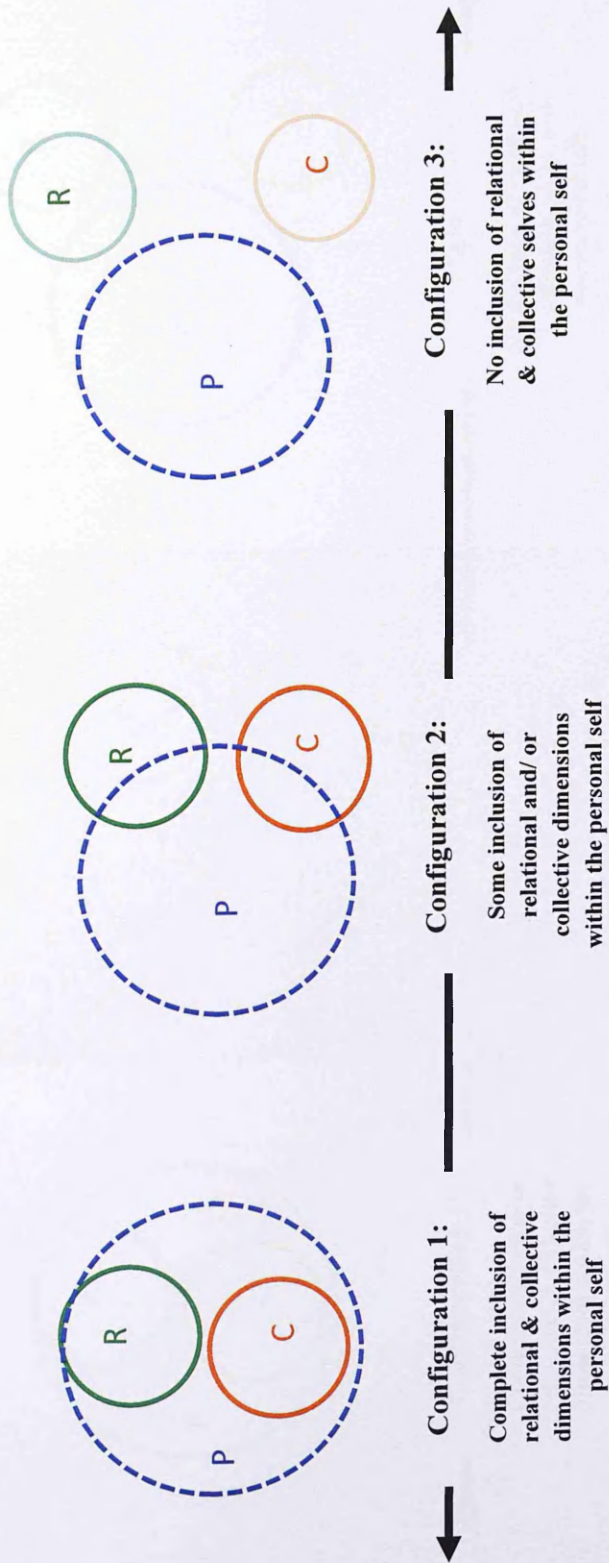
Figure 6.4: A Continuum of Patterns of Self-Configurations

P = **Personal** Dimension of the Self

R = **Relational** Dimension of the Self

C = **Collective** Dimension of the Self

Configuration 3:

No inclusion of relational & collective selves with the personal self

P = **Personal** Dimension of the Self

R = **Relational** Dimension of the Self

C = **Collective** Dimension of the Self

Configuration 2:

Some inclusion of relational and/ or collective dimensions within the personal self

Figure 6.5: A Continuum of Patterns of Self-Configurations Including Five Patterns of Self-Configurations Emerged from the Empirical Data

Configuration 1:

Complete inclusion of relational & collective dimensions within the personal self

Five patterns of self-configurations emerged from the empirical data are located in Configuration 2. They are:

(1) The complete relational self-configuration,
(2) The relationally-led self-configuration,
(3) The personal-relational equilibrium self-configuration,
(4) The personally-led self-configuration, and
(5) The personal-relational-collective self-configuration

I would conjecture that people in Configuration 1 would reveal both the relational and collective dimensions of the self in their possession stories and would offer no stories linked to their personal dimension of the self. As a result, their personal self would be completely overlapped by the relational and collective dimensions of the self. I would expect stories from people in Configuration 1 to tend to describe consumption and possessions that reveal and emphasize the relational dimension of their self (e.g. strengthening romantic relationships or affirming familial relationships) and the collective dimension of their self (e.g. in-group recognition, social status) in their *consumer identity projects*.

In contrast, Configuration 3 is situated at the other end of the continuum indicating that there is no inclusion of others (the relational dimension of the self) and in-groups in the personal self at all. I would conjecture that people in configuration 3 would emphasize the personal dimension of the self in their possession stories and would probably offer no stories linked to their relational and collective dimensions of the self. As a result, there would be no overlap in this configuration. The relational and collective circles are absent in this configuration as marked in lighter green and orange colours. Drawing on Kleine and Kleine's (2000) material, it would be possible to suggest that people in Configuration 3 might define their sense of the self only through consumption and possessions that are linked to their own individualistic qualities (e.g. achievement, personal growth, or history) in their *consumer identity projects*. Using an example from Kleine and Kleine (2000) to illustrate this point, a person regards his/ her identity as a tennis player as the main aspect of the self. He/ she is likely to view the cluster of identity-related objects (e.g. a tennis racket, a trophy or a training bag) as his/ her important possessions in his/ her *consumer identity projects* cultivating, strengthening and reflecting his/ her personal dimension of the self.

Configuration 2 (for which I found empirical evidence in the stories I collected from my Hong Kong consumers) indicates some inclusion of others (the relational dimension of the self) and/ or of in-groups (the collective dimension of the self) in the self. For example, Fiona emphasized the personal dimension self in her stories (i.e. the personally-led self-configuration) while Winston focused on the relational self in his stories (i.e. the relationally-led self-configuration). Different patterns of inclusions in the personal dimension of the self are formed depending on how individuals reveal their sense of self in relation to possessions and consumption in their *consumer identity projects*. It should be noted that my study identified five patterns of self-configurations based on the empirical data and they all belong to Configuration 2. There is evidence from consumer research that people from different social and cultural backgrounds tend to place a different emphasis on their consumption behaviours. For example, in Wallendorf and Arnould's cross cultural study of possessions (1988), women in Nigeria regarded important possessions that connected them to significant others as those possessions "made for them or given to them by others, antiques or heirlooms that tie them to previous generations, and representational items (e.g., photos), depicting their children, spouses, and grandchildren" (p. 539). Other consumers might emphasize their relationships with significant others (e.g. the Hong Kong Chinese informants in this study) in their patterns of self-configurations. For example, May, one of the informants in this study emphasized the importance of her husband, son and friends in defining her sense of self through her stories about important possessions (e.g. a gift of Rolex watch from her husband celebrating their anniversary and some of gold figures that reminded her of the relationship with her son) and her self-definition was constructed based on her relationships with these people. Other people might focus on group benefits and welfare (e.g. Japan – the national flag or consuming national products, such as Japanese rice) (Aaker and Schmitt 2001) as the key factor of defining their sense of self in their *consumer identity projects*.

6.4 The Self-Possession Boundary in Chinese Context

What constitutes the ownership of possessions? Can we draw a line to denote a possession boundary between what is mine and what is yours? This issue of the ownership of possessions has been extensively examined by Rudmin and his colleagues who have studied the semantics of ownership (Rudmin 1994, 1990). Rudmin argued that "the legal facts of ownership coincide with the psycholinguistic sense of ownership, and it is difficult to disentangle them and bring and the latter into focus" (1994: 492) and suggested that "people have a readiness to extend ownership beyond its factual bounds.... This demonstrates that conventional definitions of ownership do not encompass the full psychological domain of the concept" (1994: 501).

The ownership of possessions can be viewed in the light of legal and psychological perspectives. The legal ownership of an object is acknowledged by society as specifying the owner's right to have the object and is protected by the legal system. In contrast, psychological ownership is recognized by the individual who has a feeling of ownership over an object. "It is the individual who manifests the felt rights associated with psychological ownership" (Pierce et al 2003: 87). In other words, psychological ownership can occur in the absence of legal ownership where individuals do not actually own an object (Wilpert 1991, Etzioni 1991, Furby 1980, Peck and Shu 2009, Chen 2009). Possession ownership is a state of mind and refers to individuals' feelings of ownership towards material or immaterial objects (e.g. ideas, people or beliefs) (Van Dyne and Pierce 2004, Pierce et al. 2003, Pierce et al. 2001). As Belk (2007) noted "we can come to feel possessive about and have a sense of ownership toward things that are not our property – a panoramic view, our children, a seat in a classroom, and even our belief" (p. 131).

The self-possession boundary is defined in this thesis as delineating the relationship between an individual's sense of self and their possessions (Belk 1988, 2007, Rudmin 1990, 1994 and Pierce et al 2001, 2003). Belk's concept of possessions and the extended self (1984) is used to illustrate the notion of self-possession boundary. As Figure 6.6 shows, Belk (1988) suggests that "we regard our possessions as part of ourselves" (p.139). In other words, we extend our sense of self through our possessions. These possessions can be objects that are our assets (i.e. the legal ownership – e.g. a car, a photo and a house) and can be things that are not our property (i.e. the psychological ownership – e.g. a mountain, a building and people).
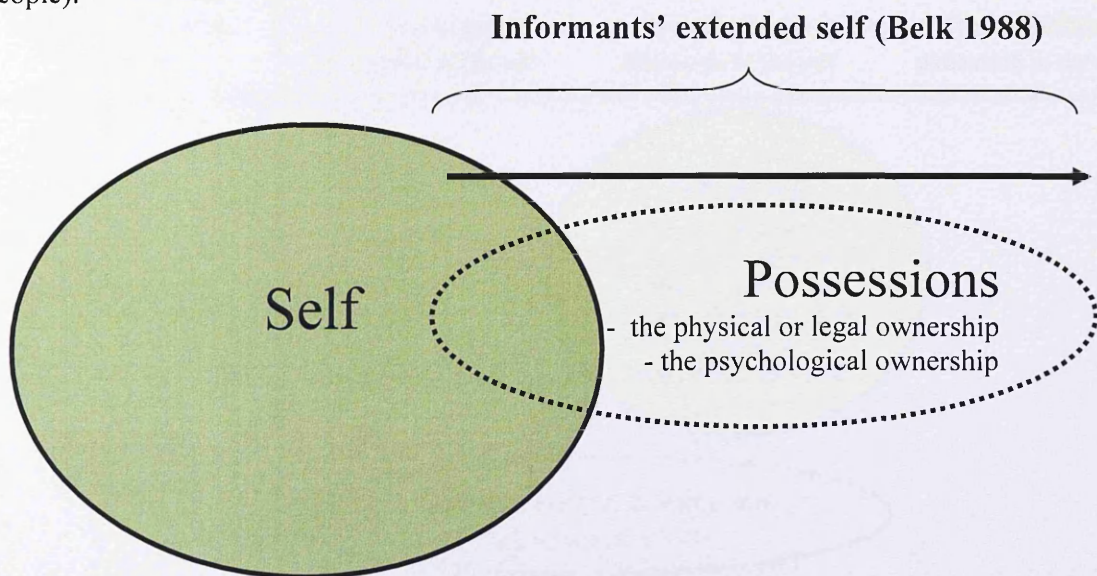
Figure 6.6: The Concept of Self-Possession Boundary (Adapted from Belk 1988)

As Figure 6.7 illustrates, the self-possession boundary of informants in this study includes firstly things that they physically and legally owned (i.e. self-gifts, gift-receipts and other objects (e.g. photos or songs) and secondly also things that they have a sense of psychological ownership (e.g. informants' gifts to close others). Most of the informants' possession stories in this study are in line with Belk's western-based definition of self-possession boundary. However, some of informants' possession stories did not fit neatly into

any western-based description. For example, informants[13] considered gifts that they had *given* to close others as still remaining as part of their own important possessions, reflecting and emphasizing their relational dimension of the self (as highlighted in yellow in Figure 6.7). This is what I have identified as informants' "*extended possessions*" within the self-possession boundary in this study (Wong and Hogg 2010). The phenomenon of the *extended possessions* emerged from the empirical finding and has not been identified in any previous possession studies. Therefore, I argue that Chinese informants potentially have a broader interpretation of the self-possession boundary than has been found in many earlier studies.
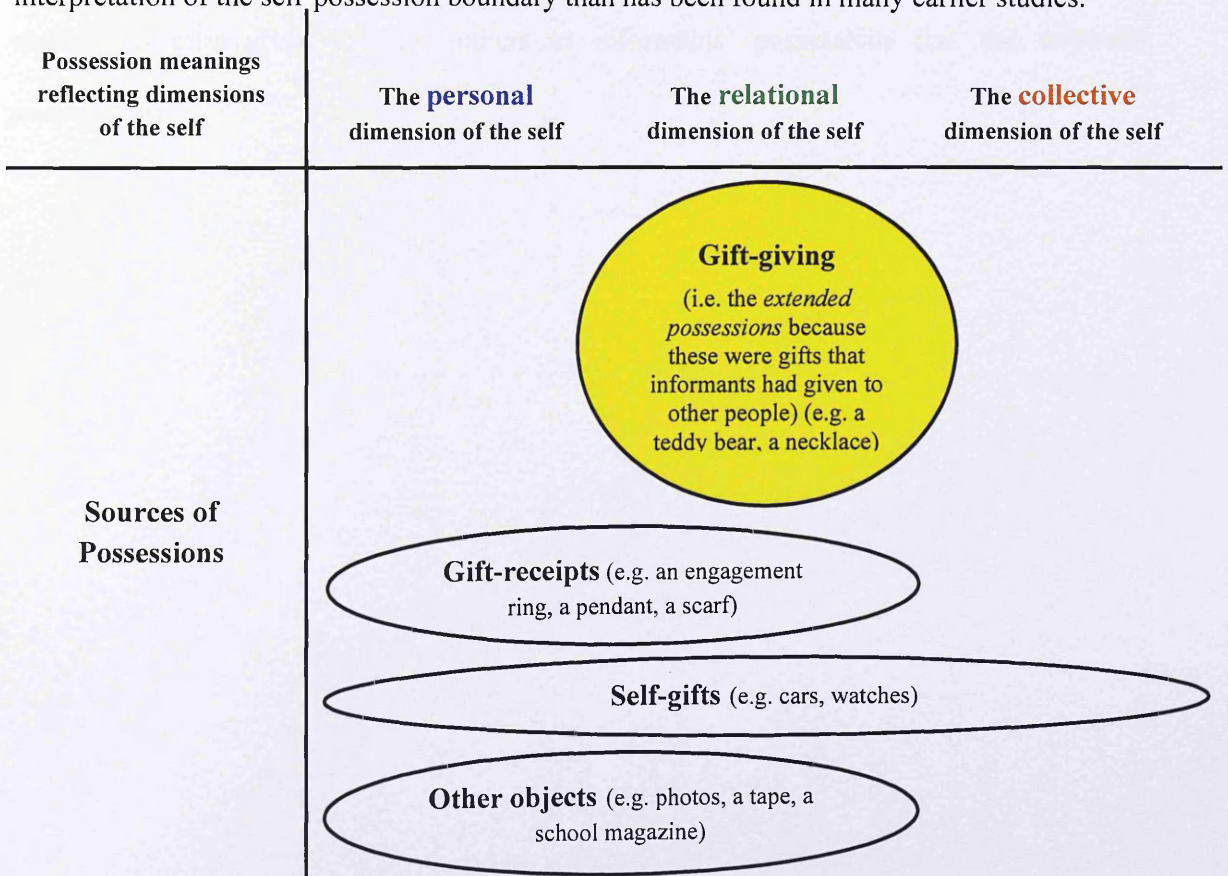
Figure 6.7 Sources of Possessions Emerged from the Empirical Data

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[13] Among the twenty informants, thirteen (May, Alan, Shirley, Peter, Sam, Ann, Lucy, Jake, Danni, Winston, Iris, Mark and Paul) told stories about possessions that were related to gifts that they had *given* to close others and which they themselves continued to regard as part of their own important possessions. In particular, almost all of Alan and Ann's possession stories are linked to gifts that they had given to their close others (e.g. Alan's wife, Ann's ex-partners, current partner and her mother).

As Figure 6.8 shows, informants viewed their close others as part of the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991, Huang 1999). Thus, informants, to a certain extent, regarded gifts that they have bought and given to close others as part of informants' own possessions (i.e. the *extended possession* within the self-possession boundary). Although the gifts physically do not belong to the informants, the informants feel psychological ownership of the gifts that represent the intimate relationships between themselves and close others. Based on the empirical findings of my study, the boundary of gifts as possessions is extended from gifts-receipts and self-gifts as informants' important possessions (i.e. often found in Western studies) to gifts given to close others as informants' possessions (i.e. the *extended possessions*).

Extended Possessions

Possessions Included in the Extended Self

Included in the Extended Self

The context of **Gifts**

Self — Gift-receipts, Self-gifts, Other objects (E.g. photos)

Gift-giving

Close Others

Directionality of Gifts

Self-gifts are gifts that informants bought for themselves and which they regard as their important possessions.

Gift-receipts are gifts that informants received from others and constitute part of their important possessions. Informants have both legal and psychological ownership of self-gifts and gift-receipts.

Other objects refer to items that informants acquired through other sources and constitute part of their important possessions. Informants have only psychological ownership (e.g. May's small gold ornaments that actually belong to her son or Ada's film) or both legal and psychological ownership of other objects (e.g. Danni's photo).

(These phenomena are commonly found in Western studies.)

Gift-giving are gifts that informants gave to others and yet still regarded as part of their own important possessions (i.e. *the extended possessions*)

Informants have only psychological ownership of the possessions (gifts).

(**This phenomenon has not been identified in Western studies.**)

Figure 6.8: Possessions and *Extended Possessions* in Self-Possession Boundary Emerged from the Empirical Data

As Figure 6.6 presents, Belk's (1988) concept of possessions and the extended self focuses only on the single linear direction relationship between an individual and his/ her possessions where the self is stretched and extended through possessions (Connell and Schau 2010). However, Belk's (1988) concept of possessions and the extended self does not capture the notion of *extended possessions* and does not explain the wider self-possession boundary found in this study. Based on the empirical findings, I build upon Belk's (1988) concept of possessions and the extended self (i.e. the self-possession boundary) by synthesizing Aron et al.'s (1991, 1992) theory of inclusion of others in the self (Figure 6.9). I include Aron et al.'s incorporation of others in the self in theory building about the self-possession boundary in the Chinese context.
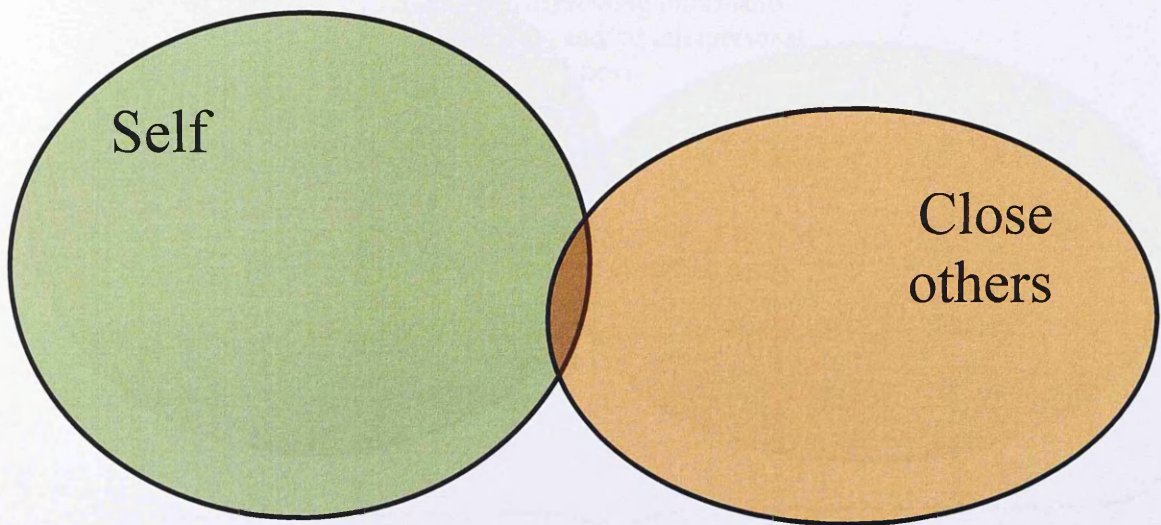
Figure 6.9: Inclusion of Others in the Self (Aron et al 1992: 596)

The notion of inclusion of others in the self (Aron et al 1992) is derived from the theory of self-expansion (Aron 1986) in order to understand people's motivation about why they start a relationship and how they maintain the relationship. Similar to Markus and Kitayama's notion of interdependent self-construal, Aron et al (1992) suggest that people view close others as part of the self. The effect of including close others in the self leads to an

overlapping of selves, and thus expansion of the self (Connell and Schau 2010). Aron et al (1995) noted that

"If other is included in the self in a relationship, it also would seem to follow that the self is not only changed, but expanded. A close relationship involves integrating, to some extent, other's resources, perspectives, and characteristics into the self" (p. 1102)

Informants' extended self (Belk 1988)

Inclusion of others in the self (Aron et al. 1992)
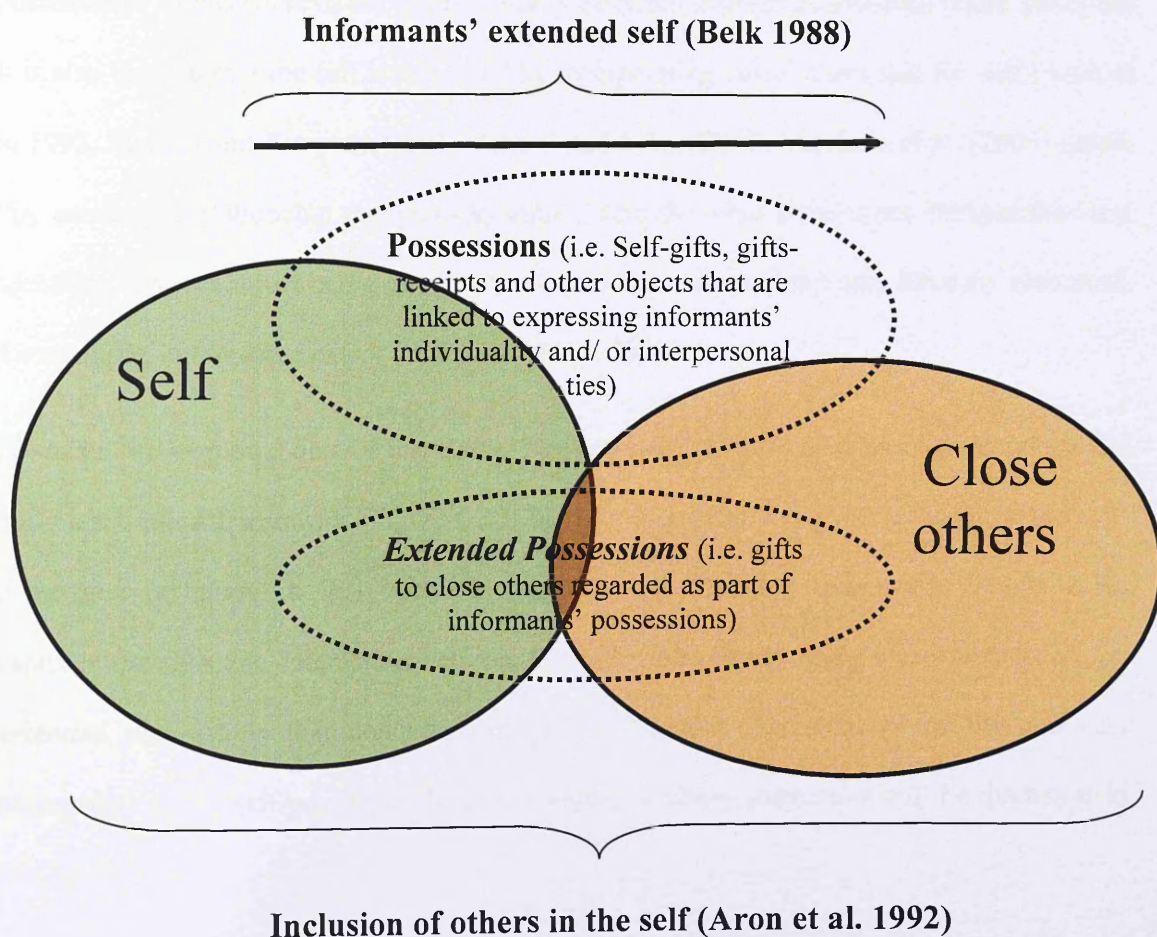
Figure 6.10: A Modified Framework of Self-Possession Boundary

Synthesis of the Notion of the Extended Possessions Emerged from the Empirical Findings of this Study, Building on Belk's (1988) Concept of Possessions and the Extended Self and Incorporating Aron et al.'s (1992) Theory of Inclusions of Others in the Self.

As Figure 6.10 shows, informants extend their sense of self (the extended self) when narrating stories about their possessions and *extended possessions* (i.e. gifts to close others as part of their important possessions). The *extended possessions* work as the means of connecting the self (the informants) and close others. In other words, informants regarded close others as part of their own self and thus, informants viewed gifts to close others (i.e. what I have termed here to be the *extended possessions*) as part of their own important possessions. In this context, the self is not only extended through possessions (Belk 1988) but it is also implied that the self is expanded by incorporating close others into the self (Aron et al 1992, Markus and Kitayama 1991, Connell and Schau 2010). As Aron et al. (2005) noted, "by entering a relationship one gains to some extent the other's resources, perspectives and identities. Instead of just being me, I am now both me and you. I not only have my resources, for example, but to some extent yours as well" (p. 209).

Based on the empirical data of this study, I extend Belk's (1988) concept of possessions and build a modified framework (Figure 6.10) in order to explain the wider concept of the self-possession boundary in this study. In addition, this modified framework (Figure 6.10) captures the dynamic interaction between the self (informants), their close others and the *extended possessions* that connect both parties together. The concept of the *extended possessions* in the self-possession boundary among Chinese consumers will be discussed in this section.

Sartre (1943) suggests that people consider objects as part of their self (i.e. the ownership of possessions) through control/ mastery (e.g. learning how to drive), creation (e.g. drawing or knitting) and knowledge. Similarly, Pierce et al (2003) have suggested that people develop some kind of psychological ownership towards possessions through controlling the object, developing a lived relationship with the object or investing themselves into the object (e.g. the

creation of a painting). In addition, Sartre regarded "giving possessions to others as a means of extended self – a special form of control" (Belk 1988: 150) as Sartre (1943) noted "the gift casts a spell over the recipient.... To give is to enslave" (p. 594). However, the view of giving possessions to others as a special form of control reflects only the individualistic goals that are a characteristic often found to be dominant in Western cultures (Cross and Madson 1997) and might not hold for non-Western cultures.

My findings showed that "control" may not be the main reason that informants viewed gifts to close others as part of their own possessions. In contrast, prioritising the needs of close others and satisfying them are the main themes for my informants in regard to their gifts to others. Informants continue to see these gifts that they had *given* to close others as part of their own important possessions (i.e. the *extended possessions*) as Cross and Madson (1997: 7) noted that "the goals and needs of family and close others are often as important as one's own goals and needs". Informants in this study tended to include their significant others as part of their own self. They seemed to make no distinction between the personal and relational goals "... or if they do, they subordinate their personal goals to collective goals" (Kitayama and Cohen 2007: 308).

Social and cultural factors play significant roles in shaping people's self-construal (i.e. the independent and interdependent selves) (Markus and Kitayama 1991, Cross and Madson 1997) and possession boundary (Dittmar 1992, Rudmin 1991). As Pierce et al. (2003) noted that "culture shapes the individual's self-concept and values with regard to control, self-identity, self-expression, ownership and property." (p. 98). Against the backdrop of Chinese culture, Chinese people tend to view and incorporate significant others into their selves (Markus and Kitayama 1991, Triandis 1989, Joy 2001). The boundary of the Chinese self is flexible or amorphous enough to include family members and significant others (e.g.

romantic partners and friends) as part of the self (Bedford and Hwang 2003, Markus and Kitayama 1991). Chinese consumers also seem to regard their possessions in a similar light, that is in much the same way as they view their sense of self. In other words, Chinese consumers seem to consider gifts that they have *given* to others (e.g. parents, marital partners, romantic partners or even friends) as their own possessions (i.e. psychological ownership) although they do not own them physically or legally. This supports Bond's (1986) suggestion that the Chinese self tends to be more holistic and to be more malleable so that the boundary of what is yours or mine might not be so clearly defined as it is in Western cultures.

One of the explanations for this phenomenon is that Chinese values and culture promote embeddedness and connectedness with significant others. Pierce et al (2003) commented that "psychological ownership is very tightly linked to the concept of self, and the concept of self, in turn, is in part socially prescribed and affected by culture" (p. 98). Chinese cultural values emphasize interdependency and togetherness with one another i.e. parent-son, husband-wife, pseudo-kinship close friends are seen as part of one body (Hwang 1999, Yau et al. 1999) and Chinese regard possessions as a means of including significant others so that "altruism and egoism merge because group-based identity is enlarged as the welfare of any group member is enlarged" (Belk 1984:757). This suggests and potentially implies that Chinese people have "a broader and more holistic idea of what a possession is" (Eckhardt and Houston 2001: 256). This places a different interpretation on how the self-possession boundaries are understood and experienced among Hong Kong Chinese informants.

The issue of ownership in relation to the structure of social relationships leads to another possible explanation about how Chinese consumers view their possessions. Chinese society emphasizes networks of relationships (Liang 1963, Brewer and Chen 2007). As Hwang (1999) noted "the self is situated at the centre of the network, and is surrounded by dominant

relationships with family members" (p. 164). Chinese values emphasize harmony in webs of social relations with significant others. "The structure of social relations in China rests largely on fluid, person-centred social networks, rather than on fixed social institutions" (Yan 1996: 13). As a result, the boundary of ownership in Chinese culture is relatively blurred compared with more western-based notions of ownership. Although informants did not physically or legally own the objects that belonged to their significant others, to a certain extent they psychologically "owned" them (Scheibe 1985). Yang's (1994) explanation of gifts in his observation of Chinese gift-giving, i.e. there is always a "little of you in me and a little of me in you" (p. 297), is the basis for my study. Chinese consumers seem to use possessions for the purpose of maintaining and enhancing their valued social ties as Eckhardt and Houston commented (2001) "...possession meaning in China is almost wholly social in nature" (p. 253). This was illustrated in my data by the cases of Alan, Kate, May, Renay and Ann because all their possession stories are related to relationships with their friends, romantic/ marital partners and family members.

Figure 6.11 summarizes the related tables and figures in order to provide a visual summary of the two contributions in this study (i.e. self-configuration based on the trichotomization of the self and self-possession boundary).

(1) Self-Configuration based on the Trichotomization of the Self	(2) Self-Possession Boundary
Figure 4.1: Patterns of Informants' Self-Configuration in the Light of the Trichotomization of the Self **Table 4.1:** Patterns of Informants' Self-Configuration: Order of Presenting Individual Analysis **Table 4.14:** Summary of Meanings o f Possessions and Patterns of Self-Configuration in Informants' Narratives **Table 6.2:** Five Patterns of Self-Configuration Emerged from the Data **Table 6.4:** A Continuum of Patterns of Self-Configuration **Table 6.5:** A Continuum of Patterns of Self-Configuration Including Five Patterns of Self-Configuration Emerged from the Empirical Data	**Table 4.2:** Self-possession Boundary: Summary of Sources of Informants' Possessions **Figure 6.7:** Sources of Possessions Emerged from the Empirical Data **Figure 6.8:** Possessions and *Extended Possessions* in Self-Possession Boundary Emerged from the Empirical Data **Figure 6.10:** A Modified Framework of Self-Possession Boundary

Table 5.1: Summary of the Findings (Possession Themes, the Trichotomization of the Self and Self-Possession Boundaries) from the Empirical Data

Figure 6.11: Visual Summary of Related Tables and Figures of Two Contributions of this Study

6.5 Is Chinese a collectivist society? Redefinition of Collectivism

The findings of my study showed that informants emphasized the relational dimension of the self (dyadic relationships with close others) rather than the collective dimension of the self (collective group relationships). This leads to the question of the extent to which Chinese society can be regarded as collectivist; and to the issue of how far a dichotomy does exist between what are usually described as individualistic and collectivist societies (Brewer and Chen 2007).

The discussion of individualism and collectivism has a long history. "Indeed, the discussion of individualism can be traced in Sophists' teaching and in the ideas of Adam Smith (1776/1949), whereas the collective themes can be found in Plato's *Republic* and in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Du Contrat Social* (1772/1954)" (Brewer and Chen 2007: 133). In more recent social science literature, Hofstede (1980), Hui (1988), Triandis (1989), Hui and Triandis (1991) have proposed the individualism-collectivism dichotomy in order to explain how cultures operate in different societies in cross-cultural studies. In Hofstede's classification (1980), individualist societies stress "I", independence, autonomy and pleasure seeking, whereas collectivist societies emphasize "we", interdependence, group identity, duties and obligations.

It should be noted that there are mixed opinions regarding Hofstede's approach. On the one hand, cross-cultural researchers have used Hofstede's definition of individualism and collectivism extensively as Bond (1994) notes "the culture-level contrast between individualism and collectivism has exerted a magnetic pull on cross-cultural researchers over the past years" (p. 69). On the other hand, Degabriele (2000), McSweeney (2002) and Brewer and Yuki (2007) have criticised the dichotomy of cultural categorization as too

simplistic and they have suggested that people in all societies have primary needs for both individual and social identity. Although both individualistic personal self and social self exist in people, the locus and content of these self-construals are "clearly culturally defined and regulated" (Brewer and Yuki 2007: 307). Brewer and Chen (2007) noted,

> *"What differs across cultures is how social identification processes are represented and channelled to regulate social cooperation and achieve a balance between expression of individuality and social conformity... people in all cultures have three levels of social orientation – individual, relational and collective levels of the self. What differs among people across cultures is the salience and priority of these three different selves" (p. 137)*

Chinese society is traditionally classified as collectivist, emphasizing collective group identity. However, the findings of this study showed that Chinese informants emphasized the relational dimension of the self to such an extent that the personal dimension of the self often seemed to completely overlap with their relational dimension of the self (i.e. similar to configuration Element 6.2.1 in Figure 6.2 in Section 6.2). In other words, their self-definition is largely based on connections with significant others. The collective dimension of the self (as represented in Figure 6.2) was largely absent in most of the informants' narratives in this study. There was little evidence of the collective dimension of the self in informants' possession stories in this study. The Chinese empirical data in this study suggest that more emphasis is placed on the relational dimension of the self rather than on the collective dimension of the self.

Brewer and Chen (2007) reviewed studies on individualism and collectivism over the past 20 years. They argued "there is a conceptual confusion about the meaning of in-groups that

constitute the target of collectivism. Collectives are rarely referred to in existing measures to assess collectivism. Instead, networks of interpersonal relationships dominate the operational definition of "in-groups" in these measures" (p. 133). In other words, the word "collectivism" is misinterpreted. Studies in collectivism were examined in terms of people's relational aspects (e.g. personalized bonds of relationships) rather than their collective orientation (e.g. depersonalized social category such as social class, student union or a voluntary association).

Using the trichotomization of the self (the personal, relational and collective self) as proposed by Brewer and Gardner (1996), Brewer and Chen (2007) suggest one way to resolve the confusion of "collectivism" would be by decomposing the term into two dimensions: *relational* collectivism and *group* collectivism. They proposed a new three-part classification of firstly individualism, secondly *relational* collectivism and thirdly *group* collectivism. People from various cultures with different salience in their self-construals place a different emphasis on the three aspects of the self when answering such "… fundamental questions, including (1) questions of self and identity (Who am I or Who are we?), (2) questions about how the physical and social world works and how things are interrelated (beliefs), and (3) questions about how things should be and what is the right course of behaviour (values)" (p. 139).

The characteristics of individualism, *relational* collectivism and *group* collectivism highlight different emphases in answering these three fundamental questions: locus of identity (self-representation), locus of agency (beliefs) and locus of obligation (values) (Table 6.1). In other words, cultural and societal factors influence people's emphasis within their self-construals in terms of the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self. While drawing distinctions between individualism, *relational* collectivism and *group* collectivism, Brewer

and Chen (2007) stressed that none of the component elements (in Table 6.1) should be seen as mutually exclusive.

> *"Within any culture, individuals can place some importance on individual uniqueness, interpersonal relationships, and group memberships, believe in the efficacy of both independent and interdependent problem solving, and place value on the interests of self, specific others, and groups as a whole" (p. 141)*

The main difference between *relational* collectivism and *group* collectivism is the intensity of the attachment involved in the relationships. *Relational* collectivism is related to the "personalized, incorporating dyadic relationship between the self and particular close others" with the bond of attachment (Brewer and Chen 2007: 137) (e.g. parent-child, romantic/ marital relationships). In contrast, *group* collectivism consists only of depersonalized relationships (e.g. memberships) in a group (e.g. a church member or an ethnic group member). The emphasis in *group* collectivism is placed on people's shared interests or on the group welfare.

Target (= area)	Locus of identity (Self-representations)	Locus of agency (Beliefs)	Locus of obligation (Values)
Individual (Personal self)	Individual uniqueness, core essence, consistency	Belief in individual agency, responsibility, basis for achievement	Self-interest primary, pursuing personal preferences, self-actualization, freedom, independence
Relationships (Interpersonal, close relationships, kin)	Close relationships define the self, others' outcomes are my outcomes	Role responsibilities determine behaviour, achievement requires interdependence	Responsiveness to others' needs, listening to their advice, maintaining harmony in relationships
Collectives (Group as a whole)	Social identification, group defines self, groups' outcomes are my outcomes	Groups as agents, achievement based on collective interdependence	Obligation to group welfare, duty, conformity to group norms

Table 6.1: Decomposition of Individualism and Collectivism (Source: Brewer and Chen 2007: 141)

Using this revised classification of individualism and collectivism as suggested by Brewer and Chen (2007), I would argue from the findings in my study that Chinese society should be viewed as a *relational*-based collectivism with the emphasis on interpersonal relationships rather than a *group*-based collectivism where the emphasis would be on the impersonal group. Chinese society is regarded and formed by a *relation*-based (Liang 1963), or relationship orientation (Ho et al. 1991, King 1985, Yang 1994). Chinese tend to view their in-group belongingness as based on their close connections with family members and including

romantic partners and close friends as the familial self (Joy 2001) and do not see their belongingness as based on the impersonal bonding to a larger group (Bedford and Hwang 2003). As Schutte and Ciarlante (1998) suggested "although Chinese are highly collectivist in orientation within their primary groups, they are not group orientated toward groups in which bonds do not run deep" (p. 35).

6.6 The Emphasis on Familial Self in the Context of Chinese Society

In Chapter 2 (literature review), I explored the interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama 1991) in Chinese society in terms of Chinese social and cultural factors (e.g. Confucian, the five-cardinal hierarchy and filial piety). The findings of the present study showed that informants, to a large extent, incorporated their intimate dyadic relationships with others (the relational dimension of the self) into their self-configurations when narrating stories about their important possessions. They emphasized relationships with close others, in particular with family members, in their possessions stories linking to their *consumer identity projects* within CCT. In the previous section, I discussed the redefinition of collectivism in Chinese society based on the empirical finding. In this section, I will discuss what constitutes the familial self in the Chinese context.

The concept of family identity, in Epp and Price's (2008) term, involves the view that the family is "a collective enterprise" (p. 50) that bundles different relationships together with family members (e.g. parent-child, sibling, grandparent-grandchildren) in order to build the notion of "collective identity" (Epp and Price 2008: 52). In other words, individuals view family as a collective identity that consists of different interpersonal relationships within family members. However, the notion of family in this study is quite different from what Epp and Price (2008) suggested. Instead of viewing family as a

group identity, my study showed that informants tend to view members of family as part of the self. Chinese consumers seem to view the boundary between one's self and the familial self as blurred and flexible so that these two selves are blended together and become a "great self" (da wo) (Bedford and Hwang 2003). As Yang (1995) noted, "in Chinese society, it is the family, rather than the individual, that is the basic structural and functional unit" (p. 22).

The familial self plays a significant role in constructing the self in Chinese society. Chinese consumers seem to have a broader definition of family members (Joy 2001). According to Joy's study (2001), Chinese people view family members (e.g. parents, siblings, romantic/ marital partners) (e.g. Jake's possession story about his father, Iris' story about her uncle, Lucy's story about her husband) as well as co-workers and friends (e.g. May's story about her friends) as part of their familial self. The familial self is characterised as "… particularistic relationships that radiate out from immediate family to extended kin…" (Pye 2000: 126). In other words, the Chinese view and define their selves through connecting with others – family, friends, co-workers or acquaintances with different degrees of intimacy (Hsu 1971, Hwang 1987, Joy et al. 2006). Family plays a fundamental role in shaping the Chinese concept of self. As Schutte and Ciarlante (1998) argued,

"The familial relationship of mutual aid and dependence is a permanent one and also extends to aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins and so on. As one Chinese proverb notes, within the family "You and I are one". Parents, in particular, remain an ongoing influence, whether through their selection or rejection of a potential spouse …. A Chinese (person) never grows out of this intense relationship

with the family. It is a lifelong affair. The goal of the child is not to grow up and move out and onwards as it is in the West" (p. 47).

The subordination of the (personal) self to the family is stressed in Chinese familism because "... obligations to others and responsiveness to the needs of others shape moral decisions and social interactions." (Cross and Madson 1997: 7). In other words, a person who acts independently of the family and does not take others into consideration is regarded as immature in Chinese culture. Maturity is viewed as "a movement towards and integration into the social fabric of the family, the clan or the village" (Kindle 1985: 99). The relational self is embraced in one's personal self and these together (the personal and relational selves) are seen as one self or familial self that influence Chinese consumers' self-construals (the construction of the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self) and behaviours. For example, Danni regarded the gift of a Seiko watch to her father as her own important possession (i.e. her *extended possession*) signifying her inclusion of her father in her own self. She was glad that that she had responded to her father's needs and had bought him a new watch.

The present study showed that informants, to a large extent, incorporated family members into their self and emphasized the relational self in their possession stories. The concept of interdependence is deeply rooted in the Chinese culture. As Joy et al. (2006) noted "the bifurcation of the individual in Hong Kong signals the importance of the subject and the relational self in Chinese culture. The word (Chinese character) for person (*ren:* 人) is written as two individuals interacting with each other" (p. 99). This reveals that interactions and communications between a person and close others has a significant impact on his/ her self-construal.

The familial self is also guided by the relational formalism that refers to the hierarchical social positions, roles, obligations and duties in social contexts. The tradition of the five cardinal hierarchies of emperor-subject, elder-young, father-son, husband-wife and friend-friend" that was discussed in Chapter 2 is a typical example of relational formalism. In Chinese society, relationships are clearly defined and can be grouped based on the principle of intimacy in Confucian ethics. Under this relational formalism, each person in a social setting knows his or her role that has to be performed and what obligations to fulfil. Yang (1995) noted,

"The formalistic aspect of interpersonal relationships is effectively consolidated, or even firmly fixed, by transforming each relation into specific dyadic roles... These relationships and their respective roles enabled the Chinese to occupy proper social positions or statuses in their social lives so that interpersonal harmony could be effectively maintained" (p. 24).

In addition, relational formalism provides some principles which people tend to follow when interacting with people from different groups. Chinese draw a clear distinction between "Own people" *zijren* (*ziji* = own, *ren* = people) and "Outsiders" *wairen* (outsider, *wai* = outside, *ren* = people) (see Figure 6.12) and behave differently according to the interaction principle (Yang 1995). The Chinese social relational networks can be categorised into three sub-groups: "*jiaren* (family members), *shuren* (familiar persons such as neighbours, friends, colleagues, or classmates), and *shengren* (strangers)" (Yang 1995: 28). Chinese consumers socially and psychologically behave accordingly based on the nature of the subgroup. Each subgroup entails a different set of norms, behaviours, interactions and treatment so that "one's relationship with another person determines how one will treat or respond to that person" (Yang 1995: 28).

"Gifts are widely accepted as a toll to reinforce social relations in many cultures. In Chinese

societies such behaviour is especially prevalent" (Tse 1996: 365). Linking the principles of

interaction to gift-giving, within the dyadic relationships with *Zijiren* (own people), Chinese

tend to draw a clear line between *jiaren* (family members) and *shuren* (familiar persons).

Chinese consumers tend to value their relationships with *jiaren* (family members) and often

view them as part of the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). The principle of interaction in

familial responsibilities *(Zenren)* is that "each does what is prescribed in his or her role to or

for the other party. What one family member does for the welfare of another is a duty" (Yang

1995: 31). Gift-giving in relation to the principle of interaction with family members is

related to obligation and satisfying family members' needs. Chinese consumers feel that they

have the obligation to take care of their parents and family members. As Schutte and

Ciarlante (1998) noted, "even within the family itself, the norm of reciprocity is observed in

the form of filial piety" (p. 38). Strong personal emotions and sentiments are often attached to

the gifts. For example, some informants in this study told stories about their gifts to their

parents or marital partners in order to respond to their relations' specific needs (e.g. Ann

bought a watch for her mother and Alan bought a music box for his wife). Reciprocity is not

expected in this category. In addition, giving money is regarded as one of the ways to show

their respect and care for senior family members. It is a general practice in Hong Kong that

adult children are expected to give a certain percentage of their salaries to their parents on a

monthly basis. Unlike in the Western culture, the financial flows in Chinese society are "in an

upward direction from adult children to parents" (Schutte and Ciarlante 1998: 51).

The interaction principle with *shuren* (familiar persons) is based on interpersonal favours

(renqing). Yang (1995) notes that "the actor is expected to take both utilitarian and relational

(affection) factors into consideration when dealing with various kinds of familiar persons". As

Yau (1994) argues, "favours done for others are often considered what may be termed "social

investments" for which handsome returns are expected" (p. 73). Comparatively speaking, the personal emotional bond is less than in the interaction with *jiaren* (family members) and "calculation takes precedence over sentiment" (Joy 2001: 250). In order to build up or maintain a relationship among *shuren* (familiar persons), appropriate and general gifts (e.g. flowers, a box of chocolate) that suit the occasion are often found (Joy 2001). Reciprocity is expected in this category of relationship and gift-giving.

In contrast to doing favours in the relationships with *shuren* (familiar persons), the relationships with *shengren* (strangers) involves the calculation of gains and losses *(Lihai)* (Hwang 1999). As Yang notes (1995) "social dealings are mainly in consideration of personal gains and losses. Interacting parties tend to make meticulous and detailed calculations of potential results of their transactions" (p. 31). This kind of relationship is often found in a group on the collective level that contains an impersonal bond. "Joint gifts… are mechanisms by which such a relationship can be maintained" (Joy 2001: 250). Gift-giving becomes more tactical and instrumental in this interaction and more like a business transaction so that both parties need to keep the balance in their relationship (Yau 1994). From the above examples, gift-giving and the interaction principles among family members, familiar persons and strangers are tightly interwoven. To summarize, the principles of interaction (see Figure 6.12) guide Chinese consumers' behaviours to different subgroups. As Joy (2001) notes,

> *"In Chinese society, the distinction between insiders and outsider is critical. It is important to be an insider at many levels of interactions because people deal with you differently based on their knowledge of you. Access to things, services, and people is barred if you are an outsider. Some transformation is essential in order to move from outsider to insider, and this is where gift giving plays an important role" (p. 251).*

Ren 人

(People)

Relationships

Zijiren 自己人   Wairen 外人

(Own people)   (Outsiders)

Subgroups

Jiaren 家人   Shuren 熟人   Shengren 生人

(Family members) (Familiar persons) (Strangers)

Principle of
interaction

Zeren 责任   Renqing 人情   Lihai 利害

(Responsibility) (Interpersonal   (Gain and loss)
                  favour)
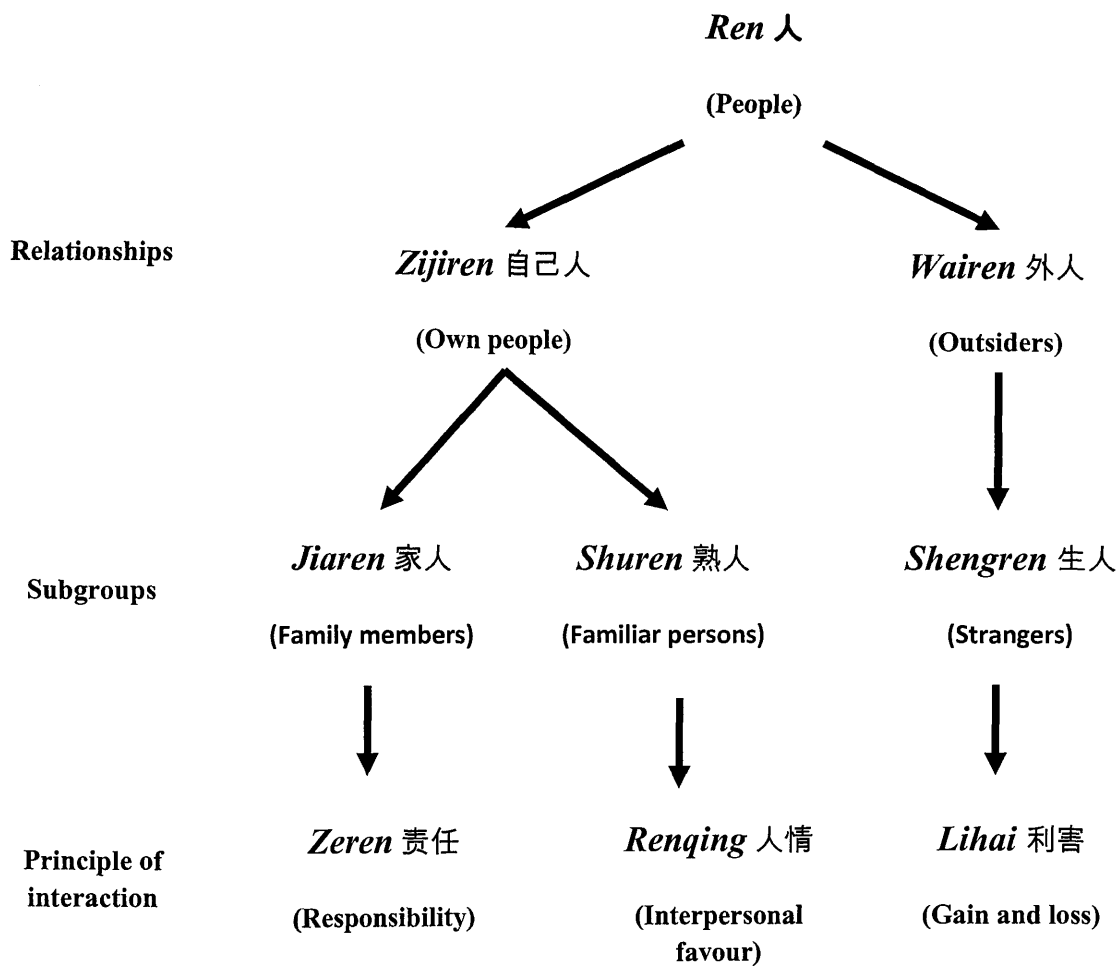
Figure 6.12: Distinctive Principles of Interaction in the Three Categories of Relationships
(Source: Yang 1995: 31)

6.7 Possession Meanings in relation to the Identity Project Life Cycle

In this study, some of the informants possessed their important objects for many years. These possessions helped informants maintain and cultivate different aspects of the self that crossed time orientations "their life narratives are forward-looking, but they are influenced by past experiences and current circumstances (Schau et al. 2009: 266). In line with CCT, people use different resources (material, symbolic and experiential) to signify and enact different aspects of the self in their *consumer identity projects* (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Although the objects remain the same, different layers of meanings have evolved depending on informants' life stages and their interpersonal relationships with the gift-givers (Wong and Hogg 2009). Using Kleine and Kleine's (2000) identity project life cycle (Figure 6.13), this section examines the impact of changes in the meanings associated with their important objects in informants' personal and relational dimensions of the self. In terms of the relational dimensions of the self, I will examine the changes in the meanings associated with informants' important objects that were often received from close others a long time ago; and the strategies informants employ when dealing with these changes with close others in the context of their "existing on-going" and "disconnected" relationships. In addition, the findings showed that meanings still exist and have an impact on informants' lives after they have disposed of or lost their important possessions some time ago.

In the light of the personal dimension of the self, I will examine the impact of changes in informants' selves on the meanings associated with their important possessions that were disposed of or lost some time ago but still carried significant meanings in their lives. As Kleine and Kleine (2000) note "not only do people use consumption for acquiring or maintaining an aspect of self-concept, they also use it to facilitate other kinds of identity change, namely, for temporarily or permanently laying aside an aspect of identity" (p. 279).

According to Kleine and Kleine (2000), the identity project life cycle (Figure 6.13) involves six basic stages, i.e. pre-socialization, identity (re)discovery, identity (re)construction, identity maintenance, identity latency and identity disposition with three sub-phases: rookie start, disengagement and latency renewal.
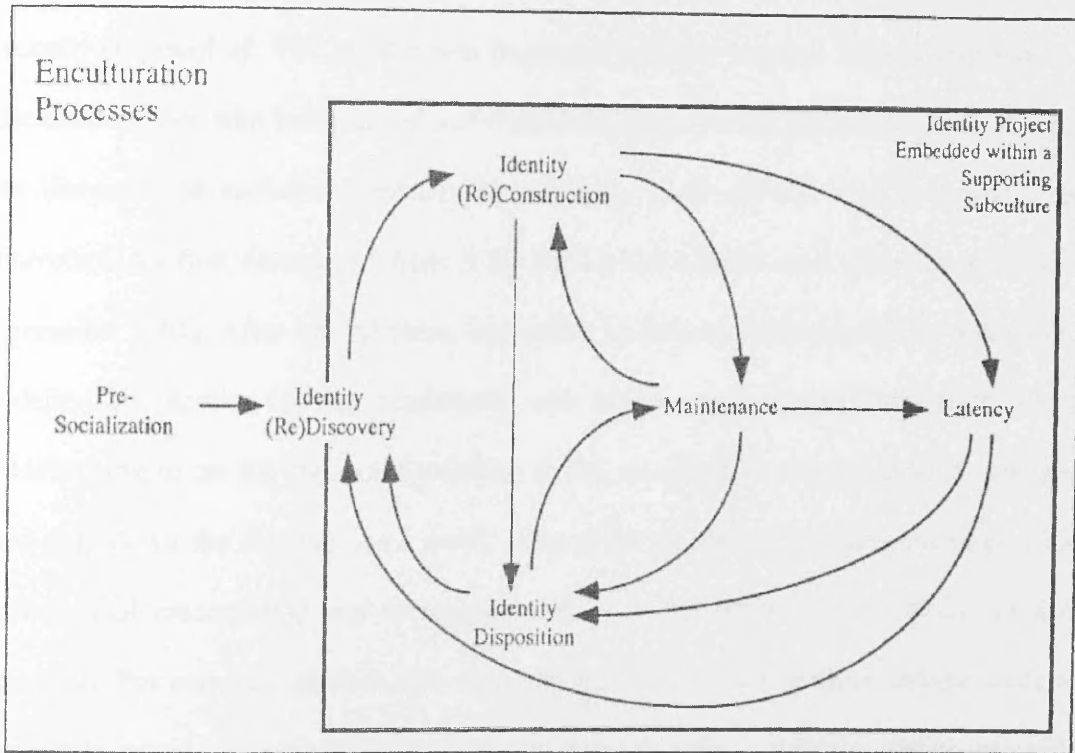
Sub-Phase	Constituent Elements
Rookie start	Pre-socialization → discovery → construction → maintenance
Disengagement	Latency → disposition
Latency renewal	Latency → re-entry → rediscovery → reconstruction → maintenance

Figure 6.13: A Model of Identity Project Life Cycle (Source: Kleine and Kleine 2000: 278)

We acquire a new identity in the sub-phase of *rookie start*. We explore and discover different types of identities and evaluate "is this a type of person I would like to become?" (Kleine and Kleine 2000: 281). We construct and maintain our preferred identities through experiences and consumption, often buying objects that are related to that particular identity (e.g. buying

tennis related products to cultivate the identity as a tennis player). In the sub-phase of *disengagement*, we might first go through the stage of latency where the "individual ceases to enact identity related activities or consumption behaviours…" (Kleine and Kleine 2000: 282) followed by the phase of identity disposition to disengage from an existing identity. For example, Peter, one of the informants in this study shared a story about a blanket that he had recently disposed of. The blanket was important to Peter because it reminded him of his deceased mother who had mended and darned the edges of the blanket for him. It signifies the disconnected mother-son relationship. Initially, Peter did not want to throw it away. Therefore, he first disengaged from it by storing the blanket in a closet (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005). After several years, he decided to dispose of the blanket in order to try to redefine his identity and his relationship with his deceased mother (Myerhoff 1982). In addition, due to our life stages and priorities in life, we might need to prioritise a new identity and play down the old one. As a result, we put the old identity aside sometimes with the intention of reconnecting and reengaging with it in the future (the sub-phase of *latency renewal*). For example, Mark in this study put his identity as a triathlon athlete aside as he wanted to secure his living by having a nine-to-five job. Being a triathlon athlete was and still is one of the important parts of his life. Mark missed his time in the triathlon competition. As he achieved his dream of getting a job with a good salary, he gradually *rebuilt* his personal self as a triathlon athlete by buying expensive and top quality training gear.

How people interpret, and often give new meanings to, their gifts as their possessions gain in importance over time has not been explored in earlier consumer research (Wong and Hogg 2009). Most gift-giving research focuses on the actual gift-giving process from the perspectives of the givers, recipients, or even of a third person in the decision making process of buying a gift. Earlier research has concentrated on the process of searching for a gift, purchasing a gift, choosing the right place or the right time to give a gift, the reaction of

recipients when receiving a gift; and how a third person often influences the decision of a giver in purchasing a gift (Joy 2001, Belk and Coon 1993) (Curasi 1999, Otnes et al. 1993, Sherry et al. 1992, Lowrey et al. 2004, Sherry 1983). However, how the meanings of gifts change over time remains unexplored.

However, Josselson, Lieblich and McAdam (2007) commented that "relationships are central, from the very beginning of and throughout life, to the constitution and expression of the self" (p. 3). Through their narratives about the important gifts that they have received, my informants revealed how their selves are maintained, modified or changed in two contrasting relationships, i.e. the "existing on-going" and "disconnected" relationships, with the gift-givers.

The emotionally and symbolically-laden meanings of gifts may change over the life course (Belk 1988, Solomon 1983) so that gift recipients reinterpret the meanings of these gifts. These gifts often become special possessions for recipients, bearing witness to their different relationship life stages such as dating, getting married, divorced, or losing their loved ones. Each relationship transition offers an opportunity for recipients to redefine and renegotiate their identities (McAlexander 1991). Throughout these trajectories of different transitions, some recipients maintained and strengthened their relationships with the gift-givers, whereas some recipients struggled or even ended their relationships with the gift-givers due to relationship breakdowns, personal disputes or death. These relationship changes lead to self-modification and self-change.

The strategy for informants in their "existing on-going" relationships with the gift-givers was to maintain and cultivate a promising future together. Informants construct their sense of self through shared experiences and consumption with their close others in the sub-phase of the

rookie start (e.g. Alan and Yuan's shared interest in collecting toy rabbits). In the case of existing on-going relationships with the gift-givers, the symbolic and emotional meanings and values of the possessions were enhanced through interactions (i.e. wearing or using the important gifts on different occasions) (Richins 1994b). For example, Danni and Peter wore a lover set of watches together when attending wedding banquets. This reinforced their relationship as a couple in public. Informants in the "existing on-going" relationships sought identity maintenance in their role-identity development (Kleine et al. 2005). For example, Shirley's engagement ring signified not only the past and the present but also looked forward to strengthening and cultivating a promising future together.

In the disconnected relationships, informants in this study often found themselves facing a dialectic tension in their narratives. They were often caught between the stages of identity disposition in the sub-phase of disengagement, and discovery, and the construction of a new identity in the sub-phase of rookie start (Kleine and Kleine 2000). The negotiation process of letting go of some things whilst keeping hold of other things amongst their meaningful possessions often helped them cope with loss and to adjust to change in this liminal phase of life transitions (Schouten 1991). "Possessions bring past meanings into the present and maintain present meanings. Possessions also help them project themselves in to the future, even beyond death" (Kleine and Baker 2004: p. 9).

Due to the fact that they will not or cannot have any further contact with the gift givers in the disconnected relationships, they are in the process of identity reconstruction, moving from disposing of their past identity (e.g. Peter as a son of his mother) to acquiring a new identity (e.g. Peter as a son of his deceased mother), giving new emotional and symbolic meanings to the gifts that they had received from their gift-givers. For example, Kate is in the process of

identity reconstruction from a married woman to a divorcee, and her narrative captures the dialectic tension experienced as a divorcee within her identity role project.

"Attachment itself, and the meanings of attachment possessions, tend to be dynamic in order to manage the relentless conflict between desiring self-continuity and needing self-change" (Kleine and Baker 2004: p. 5).

Disposing of some of her possessions (e.g. her wedding album) was a first step for her to acknowledge the identity changes she had to face in her life. However, Kate was in limbo between the old identity and the new identity (Schouten 1991) when discussing the gifts she had received from her ex-husband. She was somewhat reluctant to depart totally from the old identity and to embrace her new identity as a divorcee in her narratives.

Disposition is viewed as part of *consumer identity projects* within CCT. Most of the time disposition happens when people face major changes and life transitions (e.g. graduation, moving house, marriage, divorce, parenthood, and death). People go through the process of disposition for numerous reasons; for example, to achieve closure in a relationship with loved ones, such as divorces (McAlexander 1991, Young 1991) or the death of loved ones (e.g. Gentry and Goodwin 1999, Gentry et al. 1995, Young and Wallendorf 1989), or to adapt to a new environment (e.g. moving home) (Epp and Price 2008) or to deal with changes in their life transitions (Curasi et al. 2004, Price et al. 2000).

Linking to the personal dimension of the self, some of the informants in my study narrated stories about their voluntary disposal of their important possessions (the sub-phase of disengagement). Although informants no longer had the possessions, they still regarded them as part of their important possessions. For example, Sam told the story about his stethoscope that he had disposed of some time ago as one of his important possessions. It was important

to him because it represented one of his key life stages in the past as a medical student. Sam has become a radiologist today and possibly a consultant in radiology in the future. However, Sam did not need the stethoscope for his job anymore. Therefore, Sam sold it to another medical student as a sign of disengaging himself from his old identity as a medical student.

Similarly, most of the informants were faced with some critical events in their life transitions when they needed to make a decision or to take action in choosing between keeping the possessions that signified their past and present selves, or disposing of them in order to adapt to changes in their lives. When informants narrated the process of disposition in their stories, they were caught in a dialectic tension and often had ambivalent emotions between holding on and letting go of their important possessions. For example, Edward was at the stage of switching his job from a businessman to a lower-paid job as a music director in a Christian music company and could no longer afford his Lexus. As Roster (2001) commented, "major life transitions such as moving, a change in employment status, changes in health status, or changes in the composition of the family unit often provoked fundamental shifts in the owner-object relationship" (p. 427). Likewise, Andrew sold his first dream house to adapt to a new life stage as a sign of disconnecting from his past self as a materialistic person (owning his house) and emphasizing his new self as a spiritual person studying theology.

Informants often evaluated their life situations and prioritised some of their identities and down-played others. They were caught in the stage of latency where they put a particular identity aside temporarily and "intend to continue pursuing the identity" (Kleine and Klein 2000: 283) in the near future. In the phase of latency renewal, informants "may attempt to rebuild that aspect of their self-concept" and "re-engage an old identity that had been put aside" (Kleine and Kleine 2000: 279) later in their lives. For example, Sam persuaded himself that his then-fiancée (i.e. his relational self as a husband) was more important than his BMW

car (i.e. his personal self as a doctor) and he should love his fiancée more than his car. As a result, he sold his car (and promised himself that he would get a new and better one in the future) in order to generate more money to buy a nearly perfect diamond engagement ring for his fiancée and to have a grand wedding. Later on in his second interview, Sam kept his promise and bought his second brand new BMW that symbolically *rebuilt* his personal self as a doctor and reconstructed his social status in the prestigious brand community of doctors driving BMWs. Sam felt as if he had regained and reconnected to his lost self through buying another BMW.

6.8 Conclusion

In this Chapter, I mapped out five patterns of self-configurations based on the empirical finding (Section 6.2) and built up a theoretical framework that extended the continuum of patterns of self-configurations beyond the empirical findings as one of my contributions in this study (Section 6.3). Then I discussed the notion of self-possession boundaries (Section 6.4). In addition, I highlighted some other phenomena related to the self, possessions and consumption that emerged from the empirical findings of Hong Kong Chinese informants. They are: the redefinition of collectivism (Section 6.5), the emphasis on familial self in the context of Chinese society (Section 6.6), and possession meanings in relation to identity project life cycle (Section 6.7).

The next chapter (Chapter 7) will summarize and highlight main points of each chapter of the thesis in order to provide an overall view of the study. The academic contributions, marketing implications, the limitations of the study and directions for future research will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a holistic view of the thesis by summarizing each chapter of the thesis (Section 7.2). I will then highlight the academic contributions of the thesis (Section 7.3) and position the thesis within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Section 7.4). At the end of this chapter, I will discuss the marketing implications (Section 7.5), the limitations of this study (Section 7.6) and directions for future research (Section 7.7).

7.2 Summary of the Thesis

In **Chapter 1**, the introduction, I explained the background of the thesis by discussing the existing terrain of two interrelated areas: the self-concept and possessions. My thesis examines the interrelationships between informants' sense of the self and possessions; investigates the interpretation of meanings of possessions and self-possession boundaries; and conceptualises informants' self-configurations in terms of the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self through their possession stories in the context of Hong Kong Chinese society. I stated four research questions in the thesis. They were:

(1) What are the personal and sociocultural influences on informants' life worlds that affect the construction of their narratives about important possessions?

(2) How do informants reveal their sense of self in terms of the personal, relational and/ or collective dimensions of the self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) in relation to their stories about important possessions?

(3) How do informants interpret their meanings of possessions?

(4) What constitutes the self-possession boundary in a non-Western context?

In **Chapter 2**, the literature review, I first introduced the concept of self from two key perspectives firstly of cultural psychology (i.e. the independent and interdependent self-construals by Markus and Kitayama 1991) and secondly social psychology (the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self by Brewer and Gardner 1996) in relation to consumer behaviour. Consumer research has examined the interrelationships between the independent and interdependent self and consumer behaviour, by studying brand meanings (Escalas and Bettman 2005, Ng and Houston 2006), impulsive consumption (Zhang and Shrum 2009) and consumption symbols (Aaker and Schmitt 2001). However, so far, no studies have explored how consumers construct and reveal the concept of self in the light of the trichotomization of the self (i.e. the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self) and how different configurations of these three dimensions of the self coexist within individual consumers (Higgins and May 2001) in relation to possessions.

I then highlighted the growing interest in possessions in consumer research (Belk 1988, Wallendorf and Arnould 1989, Kleine et al. 1995, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, Schultz et al. 1989, Richin 1994a, Richins 1994b, Price et al. 2000) and the characteristics of possessions (i.e. self-developmental process and self-continuity). In addition, I discussed the meanings of possessions in terms of public and private meanings (Richins 1994a) and instrumental and symbolic meanings (Dittmar 1991). Then I examined possession studies from East Asia and explored gifts as possessions and gift-giving in the Chinese context. Studies of possessions in East Asia (Eckhardt and Houston 2001, Bih 1992) showed that the interpretation of self-possession boundary among East Asian consumers might not be that clear cut when compared with studies reported in the Western literature.

Belk (1984) suggested that using different empirical contexts would potentially enhance our understanding of the relationship between possessions and the self. In responding to Belk's (1984) and Higgins and May's (2001) suggestions, this study used an East Asian context to

investigate and conceptualise the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self as revealed via Hong Kong Chinese consumers' stories about their important possessions. Through storytelling about their important possessions, informants' interpretation of meanings of possessions and self-possession boundaries emerged and their sense of self was revealed.

In **Chapter 3**, using Crotty's (2003) research framework scaffolding approach, I outlined four assumptions that underpin my study, i.e. my ontological and epistemological position, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods.

The first level is the ontological and epistemological positioning of my study. According to Crotty (2003), ontology and epistemology tend to "emerge together" and "ontology would sit alongside epistemology informing the theoretical perspective" (p. 10). My ontological and epistemological stance is social constructionism that seeks to understand how people construct and interpret their world and their experiences as they engage in the world (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008, Creswell 2007, Burr 2003).

The second level is the theoretical perspective. My theoretical perspective is symbolic interactionism, one of the forms of interpretivism where researchers have focused on people's interpretation of meanings in the social world through the use of shared symbols in communication and people's construction of the self in the process of social interactions (Blumer 1969, Burr 2003, Bryman 2001). In line with my theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, my study explores how Hong Kong Chinese consumers, being influenced and shaped by their culture and society, make sense of the world and construct the self through the use of shared symbols in interaction and communication with one another.

The third level is methodology. Narrative inquiry is one of the interpretivist approaches that provides a rich framework by which researchers can investigate the way "humans experience

the world depicted through their stories" Webster et al. 2007: 1). Narrative is a social product of our social interaction with others and helps us make sense of the world (Gergen and Gergen 1984).

Moving onto the fourth level – methods, using Hopkinson and Hogg's (2006) action stages in narrative (storied) research, I set out the methods of narrative I used in terms of data collection, interviewing and the data analysis I used in my study. I chose to collect stories in a natural setting for my study in order to investigate how informants constructed their experiences and world and revealed their sense of self through their possession storytelling. Twenty informants (10 males and 10 females) were identified using a snowballing technique. In all, I collected 115 stories about informants' important possessions. The data analysis was undertaken in two stages: within-case analysis (restorying/retelling informants' stories) and cross-case analysis (eliciting different themes from informants' stories).

In **Chapter 4**, which dealt with the within-case analysis, I presented an idiographic analysis of narratives from ten informants (Informant 1 – 10). It should be noted that the other ten informants' narratives (Informant 11 – 20) are presented in Appendix II. I used the empirical data of each informant's narrative to answer the research questions (i.e. the personal and socio-cultural influences on informants' sense of self, their interpretation of meanings of possessions, and their self-possession boundaries) as set out in Chapter 1.

Before presenting each informant's narrative, in the style of Thompson and Troester (2002) and Epp and Price (2009), I first presented an early insight into the theoretical framework of self-configuration in terms of the trichotomization of the self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) and the notion of the *extended possessions* within self-possession boundary that had emerged from my analysis of the empirical data in order to frame my discussion of the findings in this chapter.

In the iterative back-and-forth analytical process, informants' meanings of possessions and self-configurations around the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) emerged. Five patterns of self-configuration emerged from the empirical data: the complete relational self-configuration, the relationally-led self-configuration, the personal-relational equilibrium self-configuration, the personally-led self-configuration and the personal-relational-collective self-configuration (Chapter 4 Figure 4.1).

Self-possession boundary is defined as people's construction of the ownership boundary (i.e. the possession is "MINE") and is defined in this thesis as delineating the relationship between an individual's sense of self and their possessions. In this study, some of informants' possession stories did not fit neatly into Belk's western-based definition of self-possession boundary (e.g. informants considered gifts that they had *given* to close others as still remaining as part of their own important possessions). This is what is termed and identified as informants' *"extended possessions"* in this study (Wong and Hogg 2010). I proposed a notion of *"extended possessions"* to capture this distinctive characteristic of "my possessions are mine and your possessions are mine too" (Wong and Hogg 2010) found in the empirical data.

In terms of the presentation structure adopted for each informant's idiographic narratives, in order to answer the research questions (as outlined in Chapter 1), I first outlined the informant's background of his/ her life history. Then using Clandinin and Connelly's narrative (2000) structural analysis, I reorganised and retold his/her stories revealing his/ her self-configuration, meanings of possessions and his/ her interpretation of the self-possession boundary.

In **Chapter 5**, I present the cross-case analysis where I explore patterns of possession themes across twenty informants' narratives about their important possessions. These reflect the

trichotomization of the self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) and indicate how self-possession boundaries seek to operate in this non-western context. The iteration procedure of the cross-case analysis involved examination of informants' meanings of important possessions, and self-possession boundaries tracking between existing theories and empirical data in order to generate new insights. Eleven possession themes were identified from the empirical data. Possession meanings within the **personal dimension of the self** are *self-expression* (Belk 1988, Richins 1994a), *personal achievements* (Tian et al. 2001, Kleine et al. 1995, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981), *personal history* (Schultz et la 1989) *and utilitarian aspects* (Dittmar 1989, 1991).

In addition, possession meanings within the **relational dimension of the self** are *enhancing relationships with significant others* (Ruth et al. 1999, Andersen 1991), *affirming relationships with familial or friendship intimacy* (Curasi et al. 2004, McCracken 1990, Denzin 1989), *memories of the past with significant others* (Gentry et al. 1995), *re-membering the deceased loved ones* (Myerhoff 1982, Nasim 2007, Silverman and Nickman 1993) *and negotiating identities in lost or abandoned and thus disconnected relationship in a liminal stage* (Young 1991, McAlexander 1991, Gentry et al. 1995).

Apart from possessions that are related to the **personal** and **relational** dimensions of the self, possession meanings within the **collective dimension of the self** are linked to *social status* (Tse 1996, Yau et al. 1999) and *in-group membership* (Belk 1988, Kleine and Baker 2004, Richins 1994a). In addition, I examined self-possession boundaries of informants in terms of self-gifts (Mick and Demoss 1900a, Joy et al. 2006), gift-receipts (Belk 1988, Wong and Ahuvia 1999, Belk and Coon 1993, Ruth et al. 1999) that informants had received from others, and gift-giving where informants regarded gifts that they had *given* to others as part of their own important possessions (i.e. the *extended possessions*) in this chapter.

In **Chapter 6**, which dealt with the discussion, in line with my empirical findings and analysis, I refined the earlier insights for the theoretical framework of self-configuration in terms of the trichotomization of the self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) discussed in Chapter 4. I discussed how the trichotomization of the self coexists in each individual informant's pattern of self-configuration based on the empirical findings. In addition, I further developed and proposed an extended theoretical framework – a continuum of self-configuration beyond the empirical data as one of my theoretical contributions in this study and suggested researchers could examine various self-configuration patterns of people's personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self in different contexts in future research.

Then I discussed the self-possession boundary, including the notion of the *"extended possessions"* (Wong and Hogg 2010) that emerged in this study, and the nature of possessions in the Chinese context. Based on the empirical findings, I built on Belk's (1988) concept of possessions and the extended self by synthesizing Aron et al.'s (1992) theory of the inclusion of others in the self in order to capture the notion of the *"extended possessions"* (Wong and Hogg 2010). In addition, I challenged the traditional view of the dichotomy between individualism and collectivism (Hofstede 1980) and argued that Chinese society should be viewed as a *relational collectivist* society (Brewer and Chen 2007). I also discussed the emphasis on familial self in Hong Kong Chinese society. The findings of the study showed that informants emphasized the relational dimension of the self (personal dyadic relationship with close others) particularly the relationships with family members rather than the collective dimension of the self (impersonal group relationships). At the end of the chapter, in line with CCT research, I examined how possession meanings change over time in relation to the identity life project cycle (Kleine and Kleine 2000).

7.3. Contribution to Knowledge: Academic Contributions

This study used an East Asian context to conceptualise the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self among Hong Kong Chinese consumers and examined how these dimensions of the self coexisted within individual consumers. Most of the consumer research has focused on studying the differences and comparison between the independent self-construal (the personal dimension of the self) and the interdependent self-construal (the relational and collective dimensions of the self) (Markus and Kitayama 1991, Brewer and Gardner 1996) in relation to consumer behaviours from two distinctive cultures (Aaker and Schmitt 2001, Ng and Houston 2006). They neglected the importance of how these dimensions of the self coexist within an individual. Addressing the research gap of how the coexistence of the trichotomization of the self within an individual remains unexplored (Higgins and May 2001), the first key contribution of this study is to identify and map out five patterns of self-configurations. These emerged from the empirical findings (Chapter 6 Figure 6.2).

In addition, I further developed and proposed an extended theoretical framework of a continuum of self-configuration which goes beyond the empirical data. This extended theoretical framework of a continuum which conceptualizes the variety of self-configurations is like an analogy of a periodic table (Chapter 6, Figure 6.5). It could be speculated that there might be different patterns of self-configurations for people in different social and cultural contexts that potentially lie in between these five patterns of the self-configurations found in this study. These other potential self-configurations could be explored in future research.

The second key contribution, based on the empirical findings, was to suggest the notion of the *"extended possession"* (Wong and Hogg 2010) within the self-possession boundary in order to capture a broader interpretation of self-possession boundary found in Hong Kong

Chinese informants' stories about their important possessions. The phenomenon of "regarding gifts that they have *bought* and *given* to their close others as their important possessions" has not been identified in previous studies. Most of the consumer research has focused on studying the symbolic and instrumental meanings of possessions (Dittmar 1992, Kamptner 1991, Schutlz et al. 1989) or the private and public meanings of possessions (Richins 1994a, Richins 1994b, Wong and Ahuvia 1998, Tse 1996, Yau et al 1999). The ownership of possessions in consumer research is underexplored. As Rudmin (1991) argues, people are ready to define ownership of possession beyond the physical and factual boundary. This study addressed this gap and built upon Belk's (1988) concept of possessions and the extended self in order to capture the concept of the *"extended possessions"* (Wong and Hogg 2010) within the self-possession boundary found in the empirical data of this study.

The third key contribution was to propose a redefinition of the Chinese society as a relational collectivist society using Brewer and Chen's (2007) revised classification of individualism and collectivism. Based on the empirical findings of my study, I challenged the traditional view of Chinese society as a collectivist society (Hofstede 1980) and offered a redefinition of Chinese society as a *relational collectivism* using Brewer and Chen's (2007) revised classification of individualism and collectivism. The empirical findings showed that Chinese informants emphasized the relational dimension of the self to such an extent that their personal dimension of the self often completely overlapped with their relational dimension of the self. It is suggested that their relational self coexists possibly entirely with the personal self. In other words, their self-definition is largely based on connections with significant others. In addition, the collective emphasis was largely absent in this study (as represented in Chapter 4, Figure 4.1). There was little evidence of the collective dimension of the self in informants' possession stories in this study. This leads us to the question of how collectivist Chinese society is, as it is traditionally categorised as a collectivist society. Brewer and Chen

(2007) argued that conceptual confusion exists in defining what constitutes collectivism. From the Chinese empirical data in this study, I can see that the emphasis for my informants is placed on the relational dimension of the self rather than on the collective dimension of the self. My Hong Kong Chinese informants tended to view their in-group belongingness as based on their close connections with family members. They included romantic partners and close friends as part of the familial self (Joy 2001, Hwang 1999) and not as based on the impersonal bond of a larger group (Bedford and Hwuang 2003). Using a new classification of individualism and collectivism proposed by Brewer and Chen (2007), it is suggested that Chinese is a *relational collectivist* society that emphasizes the interpersonal relationship with close others rather than a group-based collectivism where the emphasis is on the impersonal.

Based on the possession themes of my study, I identified different relational affiliation in meanings of possessions and thus extended and enhanced Richins' (1994b) classification of meanings of possessions as Richins (1994b) had offered only a limited number of meanings of possessions which fell under the relational dimension category. Richins (1994b) has only provided two categories of meanings of possessions under the dimension of interpersonal ties – "represents interpersonal ties" and "facilitates creation of interpersonal ties". These two categories seem to be too broad and can only capture the superficial layers of meanings of possessions. Individuals' possessions consist of different layers of meanings that reflect different aspects of the self (e.g. the lost self or the desired self), relationships (e.g. memorable or painful relationships) with close others, and different life transitions (e.g. dating, married, divorced or death). Based on the empirical data, I further developed the meanings of possessions to capture the richness of possession meanings of the informants.

In the light of the stories told about possessions in this study, the findings revealed that informants from this study focused more on the relational affiliation aspects of the meanings of possessions (e.g. *enhancing relationships with significant others* (Ruth et al. 1999,

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Andersen 1991), *affirming relationships with familial or friendship intimacy* (Curasi et al. 2004, McCracken 1990, Denzin 1989), *memories of the past with significant others* (Gentry et al. 1995), *re-membering the deceased loved ones* (Myerhoff 1982, Nasim 2007, Silverman and Nickman 1993) *and negotiating identities in lost or abandoned and thus disconnected relationship in a liminal stage* (Young 1991, McAlexander 1991, Gentry et al. 1995) rather than on individual autonomy aspects of possession meanings.

7.4 Positioning the thesis within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)

CCT encourages "investigation of the contextual, symbolic and experiential aspects of consumption as they unfold across a consumption cycle that includes acquisition, consumption and possession" (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 871). My study investigates the interrelationships between the self and possessions through informants' stories about their important possessions in the context of Hong Kong Chinese society. It is situated within CCT research (Consumer Culture Theory) exploring *consumer identity projects* which focus on "a social arrangement in which relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets" (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 869). In *consumer identity projects*, consumers use their resources (e.g. materials, symbols and experiences) to act out their personal, relational and collective identities (Schau et al. 2009) as "the marketplace has become a preeminent source of mythic and symbolic resources through which people... construct narratives of identity" (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 871). In my study, informants revealed different patterns of self-configurations of the personal, relational and collective selves through the storytelling about their important possessions. Informants' values and beliefs, as well as the social and cultural norms of the Hong Kong Chinese society, are all

embedded in their narratives of important possessions. These possessions carry symbolic meanings that reveal informants' sense of self in their narratives.

Narratives of life stories and life themes (i.e. life events) are common concepts that are often used in CCT analyses (Mick and Buhl 1992, Schau et al. 2009). Using narrative inquiry as the method in my study, I collected 115 stories about Chinese consumers' important possessions. Each story of an important possession is linked to a life event that composes part of the life story of an informant. In my study, informants told their life stories using different life events that "reconstruct the past and anticipate the future in order to provide their lives with meaning, unity and purposes" (Hooker and McAdams 2003: 298). As Stern et al. noted (1998), "each narrative provides insight into the way that consumers make sense of events in their lives, long considered the major function of stories in human experiences" (p. 208). In my study, while some of the life stories are linked to the personal self (e.g. self-expression, achievement and personal history) and to the collective self (e.g. social status and in-group membership), most of the informants' possession stories emphasized connectedness and togetherness with their close others. For example, the stories featured enhancing and affirming relationships with close others, memories of the past with loved ones or negotiating identities in lost or abandoned and often disconnected relationships.

7.5 Marketing Implications

Consumers make sense of the self and their consumption experiences through the construction of narratives. In this study, Hong Kong Chinese informants' stories about their possessions contributed to further understanding of the interrelationships between the meanings of possessions and product categories. For example, based on the empirical data of this study, some products (e.g. cars and equipments) are more likely to be linked to personal achievement while other products seem to relate to interpersonal ties (e.g. jewellery and

stuffed toys). Marketing managers need to craft a narrative carefully around a product that conveys the right kind of consumption message to consumers in order to create a desire for consumers to purchase the products.

In addition, culture plays an important role in shaping consumers' consumption experiences. As Hogg et al. (2009) noted, "culture provides a critical context for understanding the meanings that consumption generates" (p. 156). In a Confucian hierarchical society, Chinese consumers tend to buy expensive branded goods for people as a way of showing their respect and love. For example, some of the informants of this study mentioned Rolex watches that they had given as gifts to their parents or marital partners (i.e. the *extended possessions*) as part of their own important possessions. This is also related to the concept of "face": parents or romantic partners show how much their children or partners respect and care about them by displaying gifts visibly. "Consumption as a social practice is a dynamic and relatively autonomous process that involves the symbolic construction of a sense of self through the accumulation of culture and symbolic capital" (Shankar et al. 2001: 446). The symbolism of possessions and gifts is a powerful form of communication in Chinese society. Marketing managers could develop marketing strategies based on symbolic consumption in relation to Chinese cultural values.

7.6 Limitations

Being a reflexive researcher, I acknowledge that my own personal and socio-cultural experiences influenced and guided my interpretation of the empirical data (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2003). These kinds of pre-understanding experiences can be viewed as biases and limitations of my study. However, they should also be considered as a benefit in helping me understand informants' worlds (Lincoln and Guba 2000, Arnould and Fischer 1994). As Creswell (2003) emphasizes,

"The qualitative researcher systematically reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study.... The personal-self becomes inseparable from the researcher-self. It also represents honesty and openness to research, acknowledging that all inquiry is laden with values (p. 182).

Shankar et al. (2001) share similar views and point out that

"These pre-understandings would include the literature review the researcher had carried out pertaining to the topic of inquiry, reflections of their own consumption experiences, an appreciation of different narrative features, and a sensitivity to the broader social and cultural factors that shape people's stories. During the research conversation, the researcher draws on these pre-understandings to interpret the participants' emerging consumption story" (p. 432).

Another possible limitation is the sampling approach that identified informants with similar socio-economic and educational backgrounds (i.e. "choosing people very similar to the researcher's outlook, and to each other") (Lindridge and Wang 2008:500). In other words, the findings covered only one subgroup of Hong Kong Chinese consumers. Widening the range of informants to include different socio-economic and education backgrounds would provide deeper and more textured findings in this research area.

This study was not intended to generalize a universal truth of the interrelationships between the self and possessions. In contrast, the aim of this interpretive study was to investigate how individual consumers constructed and interpreted their experiences and worlds through their storytelling about important possessions (Murray 2003, Murray 2004). Each informant's narratives are unique, and thus generate rich and complex empirical data. As Easterby-Smith (2008) argues, "reality is determined by people rather than by objective and external factors. Hence the task of the social scientist should not be to gather facts and measure how often

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certain patterns occur, but to appreciate the different constructions and meanings that people place upon their experiences" (p. 59).

7.7 Directions for Future Research

There are four directions for future research. First, culture is defined, formed and modified through constant dynamic interactions among people in the society. Based on the empirical findings, a theoretical framework – a continuum of self-configurations in terms of the trichotomization of the self – was proposed in the thesis. Further empirical investigation is needed to portray how people from different social and cultural backgrounds reveal their patterns of self-configuration on this continuum in relation to consumption and possessions; and how the patterns of self-configuration link to their *consumer identity projects.* Which dimensions of the self do people emphasize? How do they construct and maintain their sense of self through consumption and possessions?

Second, as discussed in the previous section (Limitations), this study recruited only informants aged between 29 and 42. It would be interesting to conduct intergenerational research to examine the trichotomization of the self and the nature and meanings of possessions across different age groups in order to get a more holistic picture of people from that particular society. As Kamptner (1991) notes, adolescents are at the stage of searching for who they are and tend to focus on possessions that reveal the personal or collective dimension of the self, whereas older people are at the stage of looking back and reviewing their lives and seem to concentrate on possessions that are related to the relational affiliated aspect of the self.

Third, in this study, I revisited two of the informants (Fiona and Sam) two years after the first interviews. Both of them were in life transitions or at turning points (McAdams 1991) of their lives. Acquiring additional information from them offered some insights into how their sense

of self had changed in relation to their narratives of consumption and possessions. Longitudinal investigation of the themes of self-continuity and self-change in relation to possessions could be an interesting topic for future research in terms of how informants' sense of self changes during different transitions.

Fourth, investigation of the notion of a shared self in the parent-child dyad or in a marital/romantic dyad would be another interesting future research topic to pursue. Erikson (1959, 1982) suggests that people develop a sense of shared self with their close others (e.g. parents or partners). The empirical findings showed that some couples each narrated stories in which the same object featured as their important possession, and that they both shared idiographic experiences. Jake, for example, regarded a gift of a diamond cross pendant to Shirley as one of his important possessions in his interview. At the same time, Shirley also narrated a story about the diamond cross pendant from her perspective. Another example is that of Danni who viewed her father as part of her self and regarded a gift of a Seiko watch that she had given to her father as one of her important possessions (i.e. the *extended possession*). Further research on this area would enhance our understanding of a shared-self in close dyadic relationships as related to consumption and possessions.

7.8 Epilogue – Narratives about My Important Possessions

This is the end of my PhD journey. How did I start this journey? What did I learn from it? My PhD journey started when I became a mother seven years ago. I entered a new stage of my life with various identities, i.e. a wife, a mother, a career woman, a daughter, a sister, a friend and a member of the Chinese Christian church. I was overwhelmed with all these identities, roles and duties that I was thrown into and started asking questions like "who am I (the actual self)?", "what do I want to become (the ideal self)?", and "who are we as members of this society?" I was fascinated by all these ideas and wanted to search for some kind of

explanation. This was how I started to get interested in the construction of 'the self' in the Hong Kong Chinese context.

There are five possessions that are meaningful and important to me during my PhD journey. My first important possession is a "Paper Mate PhD" ball pen. I received it as a Christmas present from my sister-in-law five years ago when I just started my PhD program. This pen symbolised a new life stage I entered and a new identity I acquired – a PhD student. I have been using this pen ever since and have developed an idiosyncratic relationship with this pen. I used it when I interviewed the informants, attended seminars, presented papers in conferences, studied in a library and had meetings with my supervisor. This pen has become a "buddy" and developed "patina" during my PhD journey witnessing all the ups and downs of the process. This pen is also a lucky charm that I felt I couldn't live without. Once somebody took the pen for a temporarily use, I panicked and started searching for it. I felt as if part of me was lost.

The second important possession is about songs that I listened to during the PhD journey. Songs like "Pick yourself up" by Diana Krall, "God will make the way" by Don Moen, "The climb" by Miley Cyrus, "Through the rain" by Mariah Carey and some Chinese Christian songs were my inspiration during low periods in my PhD journey. These songs reminded me not to give up but to press on. The most important message in all these songs was to encourage me to stay focused on the process of writing up the thesis instead of thinking about the future result. As long as I can be in this present moment, I will enjoy every step of the write-up process.

The third important possession is a family portrait. I put it on the desk next to the computer during my write-up stage. The write-up stage was a long and challenging process that required a lot of concentration. When I lost motivation in writing or a sense of direction in

life, I would look at the photo to remind myself of my main priority in life. A PhD is just part of my life but not my whole life. The focus of my life is my family. I am lucky to have a husband and a daughter to support me along the PhD journey. As a result, I did not feel that I was alone in this process. This photo energised me and kept me focused in the write-up stage.

The fourth important possession is the prayers and countless long-distance phone calls from friends and family in Hong Kong. They sent their love and care constantly to cheer me up during my PhD journey. Although, I did not have the chance to see them as often as I would have liked in the past five years, I was not forgotten. In contrast, I was always in their prayers. They have shared a lot of Bible verses and prayers with me by email or by post. In particular, the serenity prayer is one of my favourites.

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next.
Amen.

--Reinhold Niebuhr

The final important possession is a Pandora bracelet and charms that I received from two friends whom I met during my PhD journey in Lancaster. Each charm carries a special meaning and message contained within. For example, I have received charms to wish me good luck in my viva, to remind me of my homeland and to deliver a message of love.

I came to Lancaster University and not only I have earned a doctorate degree but I have also gained valuable friendships for life. This bracelet has become part of me and I wear it constantly. Over time, the meaning of this possession has become idiosyncratic, singular, and irreplaceable with intertwined layers of meanings as this Pandora bracelet gradually takes on "patina" (McCracken 1990).

Mapping out the Trichotomization of the Self: the Relationally-led Self-Configuration

As Figure 7.1 shows, my important possession stories revolve around relationships with friends and family reflecting on the relational dimension of self. In the light of my personal dimension of the self, I recounted stories about my important possessions that are related to my personal history of the PhD journey. There was no story relating to the collective dimension of the self. Most of my important possessions are linked to the relational dimension of the self. As a result, there is no overlapping in my personal self. As Figure 7.1 shows, the personal self is largely overlapped by incorporating my family and friends within the self. The pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration.
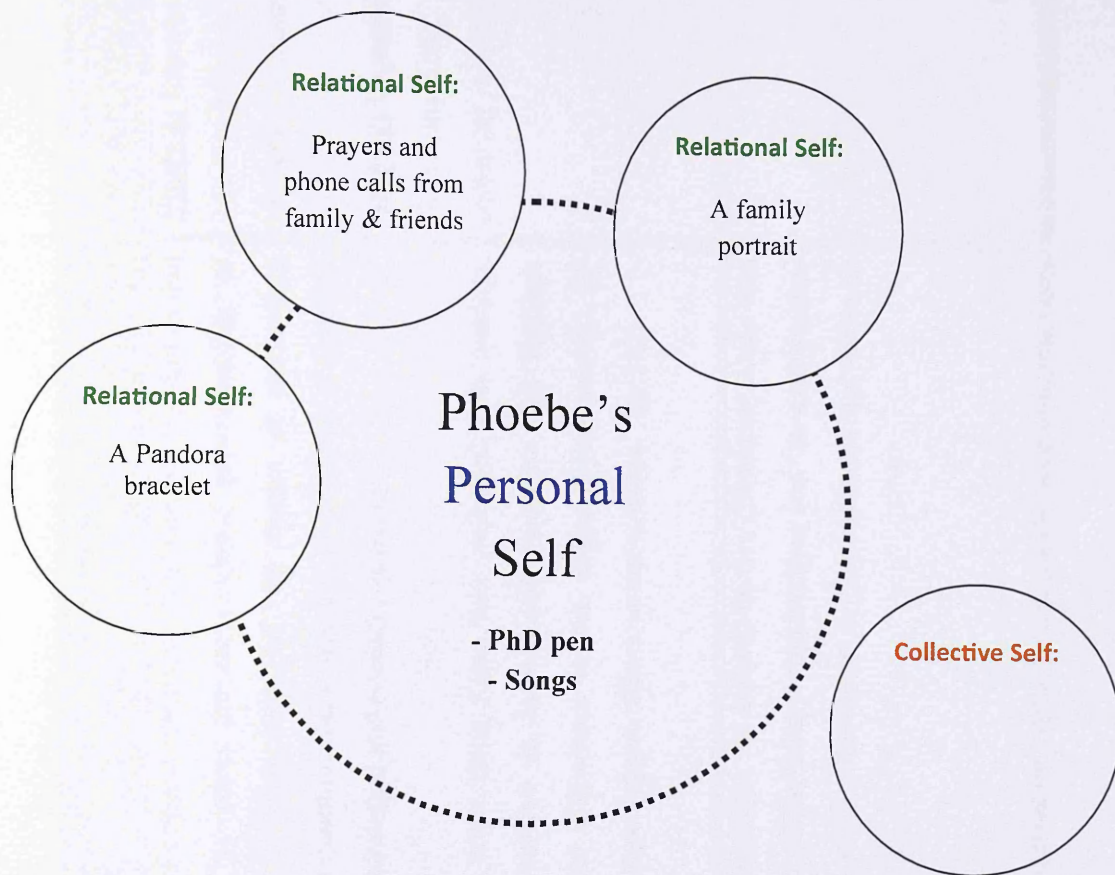
Figure 7.1: Phoebe's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the self

My PhD journey has been an amazing life experience. This journey of self-discovery has helped me find passion in what I want to do – being a researcher to explore issues around the self, possessions and consumption. Each consumer has unique and interesting stories to share about their possessions and consumption experience. The PhD training has given me a critical mindset to question issues from different angles, provided me with methodological skills to investigate consumers' lived world, and helped me understand and appreciate the complexity of the world that we inhabit.

This is the end of the journey. Pursuing a doctorate degree was one of the most difficult challenges and I am proud that I have achieved it.

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Appendix I: Summary of Studies in Self-construals in Consumer Research

Name of Author	Title of Article	Summary of the study	Method
Aaker and Maheswaran (1997) *Journal of Consumer Research*	"The effect of cultural orientation on persuasion"	To examine the effect of cultural orientation (self-construals (Markus and Kitayama 1991) and "to assess the cross-cultural generalisability of persuasion effects" (p. 315) in terms of "the impact of motivation, congruity of persuasive communication and the diagnosticity of heuristic cues on the processing strategies and product evaluation". The experimental data from Hong Kong was compared with findings documented in past research in individualist cultures. The findings showed that "perceptual differences in cue diagnosticity account for systematic differences in persuasive effects across cultures." (p. 315)	**Study 1:** Experiment 136 Hong Kong university students **Study 2:** Experiment 119 Hong Kong university students
Wong and Ahuvia (1998) *Psychology & Marketing*	"Personal tastes and family face: luxury consumption in Confucian and Western societies"	A conceptual paper: to examine the cultural factors (Southeast Asian and Western cultures) that underlie luxury consumption and "to explore how the practice of luxury consumption differs in these cultures" (p. 423) – 8 propositions are proposed.	-

Joy (2001) **Journal of Consumer Research**	"Gift-giving in Hong Kong and the continuum of social ties"	"To explore gift-giving practices using data collected through interviews in Hong Kong... Chinese culture promotes the familiar over the private self and the attainment of family-oriented goals represents an important measure of self-realization and self-fulfilment" (p. 239) The findings showed that the boundaries of the Chinese self (the familial self) are flexible enough to include others (e.g. romantic partners and close friends). Joy suggested "there are various gradations of intimacy in gift relationships..." (p. 239) and developed a gift continuum to describe this phenomena. Joy's (2001) study is particularly relevant to the current research as I investigate the interrelationships between the self and possessions among Hong Kong Chinese consumers.	**In-depth interviews:** 35 university students **Limited observations** of participants in their homes or at university residences
Aaker and Lee (2001) **Journal of**	"'I' seek pleasures and "we" avoid pains: the role of self-regulatory goals	To examine the role of self-regulatory goals in information processing and persuasion in relation to independent and interdependent self-views Findings: "individuals with an accessible independent self-view are more	**Study 1:** Experiment 94 U.S. Caucasian college students **Study 2:** Experiment

Consumer Research	in information processing and persuasion	persuaded by promotion-focused information that is consistent with an approach goal (e.g. achievement and aspirations). In contrast, individuals whose interdependent self-view is more accessible are more persuaded by prevention focused information that is consistent with an avoidance goal (e.g. responsibilities, obligations and security)" (p. 33)	101 U.S university students & 96 Hong Kong university students **Study 3:** Experiment 177 U.S. university students **Study 4:** Experiment 83 Hong Kong university students
Aaker and Schmitt (2001) ***Journal of Cross-cultural psychology***	"Culture-dependent assimilation and differentiation of the self: preferences for consumption symbols in the US and China"	"To investigate how differences in self-construal patterns affect preferences for consumption symbols through the process of self-expression" (p. 561) Findings: "Individuals with a dominant independent self-construal hold attitudes that allow them to express that they are distinct from others. In contrast, individuals with a dominant interdependent self-construal are more likely to hold attitudes that demonstrate points of similarity with their peers" (p. 561)	**Study 1:** Questionnaires 50 Chinese university students from Hong Kong 71 Caucasian university students from the U.S. **Study 2:** Questionnaires

			79 Chinese American university students 75 Anglo American university students
Eckhardt and Houston (2001) *Asia Pacific Advances in Consumer Research*	"To own your grandfather's spirit: the nature of possessions and their meaning in China"	To investigate the nature of possessions and important possession meaning in urban and rural Guangdong province in southern China Findings: "The nature of what a possession is as well as the nature of important possession meanings are substantially different for the Chinese from what has been reported with reference to U.S. subjects. The major findings from this study are that possessions are a multilevel concept embodying both tangible and intangible objects, and that the importance of possessions stems almost wholly from their relationship to social ties." (p. 251)	**Semi-structured group interviews triangulated with participant observation:** 52 participants from southern China
Escalas and Bettman (2005)	"Self-construal, reference groups,	1) To examine the influence of in-groups and out-groups on self-brand connection due to differences in independent and interdependent selves	**Study 1:** Questionnaires

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Journal of Consumer Research	and brand meaning" (Markus and Kitayama 1991) (ethno-cultural backgrounds – Chinese, Hispanic and white Americans) 2) To examine the influence of in-groups and out-groups on self-brand connections in terms of chronic differences in independent vs. interdependent self-construals The findings showed that "consumers report higher self-brand connections for brands with images that are consistent with the image of an in-group compared to brands with images that are inconsistent with the image of an in-group". In terms of self-construals and brand congruency, the findings showed that "the negative effect of out-group brand associations on self-brand connections is stronger for independent consumers than for interdependent consumers." (p. 388) Escalas and Bettman (2005) argued that "this is due to the stronger needs of more independent consumers to differentiate themselves from out-groups" (p. 388).	288 U.S. university students **Study 2:** Questionnaires 161 U.S. university students
Joy et al. (2006) *Book chapter in Belk's book*	"Metaphors of self and self-gifts in interdependent cultures: narratives" "To examine subject and self-metaphors in Cantonese in order to understand the impact of self-conceptualization on self-giving in Hong Kong"	**In-depth interview:** 24 university students and 16 managers in Hong Kong

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	from Hong Kong"	The findings showed that Hong Kong people tended to consider others in self-gifting. "The mental accounting in this instance reflects the importance given to the consideration of others prior to or simultaneously with rewarding oneself for the successful achievement of a personal goal" (p. 99)	**Study 1:** questionnaires 96 university students from Singapore and 103 university students from the U.S. **Study 2:** questionnaires 70 university students from Singapore **Study 3:** questionnaires 80 university students from the U.S. **Study 4:** questionnaires 58 university students from Singapore
Ng and Houston (2006) *Journal of Consumer Research*	"Exemplars or beliefs? The impact of self-view on the nature and relative influence of brand associations"	"To examine whether various forms of brand associations – overall brand beliefs (e.g. Sony is high quality) versus exemplars of the brand (e.g. Sony TV) – are differentially accessible for individuals with independent self-views and those with an interdependent self-view. "Since independents emphasize the "traitedness" of behaviour and tend to focus on attributes of objects, brand beliefs are relatively more accessible than exemplars to them. Conversely, since interdependent people focus more on the role of contextual factors and the interrelatedness of events, exemplars are relatively more accessible to them than brand beliefs" (p. 519)	
Swaminathan et al.	"My" brand or "our"	"The effects of self-concept connection (the personal self) and brand	**Study 1:**

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(2007) *Journal of Consumer Research*	brand: the effects of brand relationship dimensions and self-construal on brand evaluations	country-of-origin connection (the collective self) vary based on self-construal. Results across 2 studies reveal that under independent self-construal, self-concept connection is more important. Under interdependent self-construal, brand country-of-origin connection is more important" (p. 248) in relation to brand meanings and brand evaluations.	Questionnaires 320 U.S. university students **Study 2:** Questionnaires 150 U.S. university students
Jain et al. (2007) *Journal of Consumer Research*	"The influence of chronic and situational self-construal on categorization"	To examine the influence of chronic (i.e. most frequently use) and situational (i.e. temporally accessibility) self-construal on individualist (independent self-construal) and collectivist (interdependent self-construal) consumers' object categorization The findings showed that although people have their chronic accessibility of a particular self-construal, these self-construals could be activated at different times or in different contexts (i.e. temporally accessibility). "A major contribution of this research is the demonstration that consumers varying in their collectivist versus individualist self-construal – chronic and/ or situational – differ in their categorizations, even of products and objects where normative significance of differences in self-construal is not readily apparent." (p. 74)	**Study 1:** questionnaires 185 U.S. university students **Study 2:** questionnaires 88 U.S. university students **Study 3:** experiment 103 U.S. university students **Study 4:** questionnaires 111 North American university students and 66 East Asian university students

Zhang and Shrum (2009) *Journal of Consumer Research*	"The influence of self-construal on impulsive consumption"	To examine "the possible influence of self-construal (independent and interdependent self-construals Markus and Kitayama 1991)– both at the cultural level and individual level – on impulsive consumption" (p. 838) The findings showed that "self-construal has a causal influence on impulsive consumption" (p. 846). For example, "peer presence increased impulsive consumption tendencies for independents but decreased them for interdependent." (p. 838).	**Study 1:** on-line data research **Study 2:** questionnaires 128 U.S. university students **Study 3:** Experiment primed self-report – 223 U.S. university students

Appendix II: Within-case Analysis – Informant 11 - 20

8.1 The Presentation Order of Informant's Narratives

This appendix presents individual narratives from Informant 11 – 20. The order of presenting narratives of each informant will be based on patterns of self-configuration (Table 8.1). First, narratives of three informants (Ann, Renay and Lucy) who represent the complete relational self-configuration will be presented. Second, individual analysis of Jake, Danni, Winston and Iris, who corresponded to the pattern of the relationally-led self-configuration, will be presented. Third, I will present Mark's narratives that reveal the personally-led self-configuration. Finally, Paul and Andrew's narratives about their important possessions are linked to the personal-relational-collective self-configuration.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Hong Kong Chinese seemed to have a broader interpretation of what constitutes their sense of self and their self-possession boundaries. Among these ten informants (Informant 11 – 20), eight of them (Ann, Lucy, Jake, Danni, Winston, Iris, Mark and Paul) have possessions stories that are linked not only to self-gifts and gift-receipts, but also are related to gifts that they had *given* to close others as part of their important possessions (i.e. the *extended possessions*). Although these gifts did not belong to the informants, they still considered that they had psychological ownership of these gifts and these have termed *extended possessions* (Wong and Hogg 2010). In particular, almost all of Ann's possession stories are linked to gifts that she had given to her significant others. Table 8.1

summarizes the order of presenting within-case analysis in this appendix. An asterisk (*) is used to indicate informants who had possession stories that are related to gifts that they had given to their close others (i.e. *extended possessions*).

Name of Informants	Patterns of Self-Configuration
11) Ann*	The complete Relational self-configuration
12) Renay	The complete Relational self-configuration
13) Lucy*	The complete Relationally-led self-configuration
14) Jake*	The Relationally-led self-configuration
15) Danni*	The Relationally-led self-configuration
16) Winston*	The Relationally-led self-configuration
17) Iris*	The Relationally-led self-configuration
18) Mark*	The Personally-led self-configuration
19) Paul*	The Personal-Relational-Collective self-configuration
20) Andrew	The Personal-Relational-Collective self-configuration

Table 8.1: Order of Presenting Individual Analysis in Appendix II.

*= Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their own possessions in some of their possession stories.

8.2 The Order of Presentation Within Each Informant's Narratives

This section presents 10 informants' narratives of their important possessions revealing their dimensions of the self. Each individual case-analysis consists of (1) an informant's life narrative and (2) analysis. The detailed explanation of the order of presentation within each informant's narratives is located in Chapter 4. Table 8.2 summarizes the structure of presentation of each informant's narratives.

Order of Presentation Within Each Informant's Narratives	Description
1) Informant's Life Narrative	To indicate key aspects of his/ her life in terms of his/ her background and characteristics (e.g. belief and values)
2) Analysis	To demonstrate analysis of an informant's narratives revealing different dimensions of the self (the personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self) and possession meanings linking to his/ her self-configuration

Table 8.2: The Order of Presentation Within Each Informant's Narratives

8.2.1 Informant 11: Ann

8.2.1.1 Ann's Life Narrative

Ann is a 42-year-old mature undergraduate student in Arts at Lancaster University. Prior to her studies in the UK, she was a dentist in Hong Kong for 15 years. Ann grew up in a respectable family with two older brother and parents. She is the youngest in the family. Being the youngest person in the family, Ann is always loved and protected by her family. Ann enjoyed reading books and was good at mathematics. She enrolled in a prestigious high school in Hong Kong and achieved good grades in GCSEs. Ann was an obedient girl who listened to her brothers and parents' advice. With good grades in GCSEs and A-levels, they all suggested Ann become a doctor, a dentist, an architect, a lawyer or whatever profession would promise prosperity in her future career path. She wanted to study Arts but her parents rejected the idea since being an artist does not provide good income or a promising prosperous future. In the end, she took her brother's advice to become a dentist because she wanted to fulfil her brother's dream to become a dentist. It was more like an obligation for her to follow her parents' guidance rather than fulfilling her own dream.

While Ann was studying dentistry, she met her ex-husband, Andy, who was also a student in dentistry at the university. They were married soon after their graduation, bought their first house, earned good money and enjoyed life. As Ann is always very obedient to her brothers and parents, she was also very obedient and dependent on her ex-husband, Andy at that time of their marriage. Andy was very protective and controlling. He believed that he knew what was the best for Ann and asked her to follow his way. Having been an obedient girl in her family for all her life, she was very obedient to her ex-husband as well. Ann gave all her salary to him and let him plan things for the family. However, that kind of lifestyle was not what Ann longed for. Deep down, Ann knew that she wanted something more than just a

nine-to-five stable job with good income. In contrast, she wanted something different for her life, i.e. to be an artist. The desire of becoming an artist grew stronger. As time went by, Ann was determined to pursue her dream.

Ann started taking some art courses in the evening after work and realized that being an artist would be a dream for her. At the same time, the difference between Andy and Ann was getting wider. While her husband was enjoying the stable nine-to-five lifestyle and wanted to have a baby with her, Ann wanted to pursue her passion for the arts and to become a full time artist. The differences did not resolve themselves and ended in a divorce. Ann was not very upset with the decision. In contrast, Ann felt that she was free at last from the marriage and could do something she had always wanted to do, i.e. to pursue her passion for the arts.

After working in the dentistry for 15 years, Ann closed down her dental clinic. She used some of her savings to buy a house for her parents as a sign of thanking them for upbringing and she kept the rest of the money for herself to support her undergraduate studies in Arts at Lancaster University. Ann felt that finally she could be herself and do something she had always longed for become, an artist.

8.2.1.2 Analysis of Ann's Stories about Her Important Possessions: the Complete Relational Self-Configuration

As Table 8.3 shows, the things that Ann regarded as important possessions are all linked to the relational dimension of the self. Ann's five stories of her important possessions revealed her identities in different relationships as a pet carer to with her deceased cat (Mike), as an ex-wife to her ex-husband (Andy), as an ex-girlfriend to her ex-boyfriend (Ben), as a girlfriend to her current boyfriend (Asad) and as a daughter to her mother. The theme of "caring for others" was dominant in her narratives when telling her possession stories. There was no story relating to her personal and collective dimensions of the self. Her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the complete relational self-configuration.

In terms of self-possession boundary, similar to Alan, almost all Ann's possessions are gifts that she had *given* to close others (i.e. *extended possessions*). Although those possessions did not belong to Ann, she still perceived them as part of her own important possessions suggesting Ann has a broader view of the construction of her sense of self and possessions.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Ann's Important Possessions
Personal Self	-	-
Relational Self	Enhancing and strengthening relationship with romantic partners	1) A wedding gift of a watch for her ex-husband
		2) A gift of a watch for her current boyfriend
		3) A gift of a watch for her ex-boyfriend
	Affirming familial relationship with her mother	A gift of a watch for her mother
	Memories of the past with specific person(s)	1) A wedding gift of a watch for her ex-husband
		2) A gift of a watch for her current boyfriend
		3) A gift of a watch for her ex-boyfriend
		4) A gift of a watch for her mother
		5) A scuba diving watch
		6) Mementos of her cat
	Re-membering the deceased loved one: Mike, her cat	1) A scuba diving watch
		2) Mementos of her cat
Collective Self	-	-

Table 8.3: Ann's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Ann spent more than half of her interview time narrating a story about a scuba diving watch that was linked to her relationship with her deceased cat, Mike. She explained how important the cat was and still is in her life, reflecting her relational dimension of the self. Ann used to use the watch in her scuba diving lessons. However, the story of the watch as an important possession has nothing to do with her scuba diving experience. It reminded Ann of her close relationship with her cat. Different layers of idiosyncratic symbolic and emotional meanings of the watch were added and enriched through the interactions with Mike and the watch (Richins 1994b).

> S: This first one (the scuba diving watch) is ... very important to me. It has a special meaning between me and my cat, Mike (from the nickname Mickey Mouse) who died (three years ago just before Ann came to Lancaster to study arts). In the beginning, the watch has nothing to do with him. The watch is a scuba diving plastic watch. The brand is Tag Heuer. I bought this when I started my diving lesson. It is more than 10 years old. I still have it. The front case is totally scratched. I still have it coz I love it very very very very much. The plastic ring of the front case used to be white. When the white straps broke, I change them to black. From there, it is always a white front case with black straps. The watch I like very much...

Ann bought Mike from a pet shop just after her divorce. Ann used to be very dependent on, and was controlled by, her ex-husband, Andy. *"He really controlled me so much in terms of what I spent... It was quite scary. Even though I earned my own salary, he would still control that. I would give all my salary to him to pay the mortgage of our flat"*. Although Ann received another cat as a gift from her husband after separation, she did not like it because that cat is *"clingier"* representing her past undesired self as being dependent on her ex-husband. Instead, she bought Mike herself as a self-gift that symbolically represented her desired self of being independent and free from her controlling marriage. Ann viewed the cat as her extended self (Belk 1996a) as Savishinsky (Savishinsky 1983: 120), "to the extent that pets are extensions, a person's choice of an animal is an act of self definition".

> S: I got him from a pet shop. At that time, I told my ex-husband that I would like to live separately. He was worried that I was bored. So he bought one for me. Then one

day after work, I bought Ah B (Mike's nickname). The one my husband bought is clingier. But Ah B was more independent.

In addition, Ann bought Mike as a self-gift to serve communicative and therapeutic functions (Mick and Demoss 1990a). Through Mike, Ann communicated messages about different aspects of her self, disconnecting her old undesired self (which she saw as being dependent and powerless) and encouraging her new reborn desired self as an independent and empowered woman. Mike also was seen as a transitional object that eased her pain, providing comfort in that critical life stage (Belk 1988), and serving as a therapeutic function during the process of Ann's divorce. As Hirschman (1994: 620) commented "for consumers for whom human companionship has been difficult or strained, animal companionship can provide deeply needed emotional support and solace." Facing all the difficulties in the transitional life stage, i.e. failing marriage and wanting to quit her job to pursue the arts, it was Mike that provided companionship and loyalty for her (Fogle 1981, Horn and Meer 1984, Belk 1996a). In order to reward Mike's loyalty, she spoiled him whenever she could.

S: He did not chew anything except my watch. He did not bite anything. He was my most favourite thing. I loved him... really spoiled him. I really spoiled him. About chewing marks, after a few years, I needed to change them as they got old and worn out. I did not keep the straps after changing them coz I did not think there would be something happened. The new straps... I got only few chewing marks from him... after a while... he died. I really miss him. Every time I look at the straps, I thought about him.

Unfortunately, Mike passed away three years ago in an accident just before Ann came to Lancaster to study Arts. Ann was heart-broken as she lost part of her self (Belk 1988) and needed to see a therapist to cope with this traumatic experience. As Stephens and Hill (1996: 201) commented, "... many animal companions play a part in the lives of their owners, not as objects but as loved and cherished members of families who are a source of joy throughout their lives. The death of these pets, particularly an unexpected or tragic death, results in great sorrow and grief consistent with the loss of a close personal friend, spouse, or child." Mike's

possessions were kept as mementos (Cowles 1985). Ann kept everything that belonged to Mike, i.e. his toys, brush, hair and even his DNA. In addition, Ann carries Mike's hair all the time to feel his presence. She regularly used the scuba diving watch until recently she was worried that the straps would be broken. Therefore, she now keeps the watch in a safe place as a good memento and to ensure there is no damage to it. The sacredness that Ann invests in her watch reflects on the importance of Mike's status in her heart (Belk et al. 1989).

> *S: I have other Ah B's stuff in Hong Kong. His toys, brush and hair... I have Ah B's hair in my bag normally. But not today... I worked in the studio and worried that I would lose it. I got Ah B's DNA. I just wanted to keep Ah B's stuff whatever I can.... the watch with Ah B's (the cat) chewing marks... I always wore for more than 10 years until I recently was worried that the straps would be broken. Then I stopped using it.*

Ann told her second possession story about a watch that she had bought and *given* to her then-husband, Andy on their wedding day revealing her relational dimension of the self as an ex-wife to her ex-husband in the past. Although the watch belonged to her ex-husband, Ann considered the watch as one of her important possessions (i.e. the *extended possession*). Individuals tend to develop sense of ownership towards an object through investing their time, money or effort into the object (Pierce et al. 2003). The watch was an important gift that she carefully chose and gave to her ex-husband, Andy as a wedding gift to mark one of her important stages of her life, from a dating stage to a marital stage. She bought this secret gift to surprise Andy on a special occasion (Sherry 1983). This watch signified her love at that time towards him and symbolized her commitment to him. To Ann's disappointment, Andy did not use the watch at all. The original meaning of the gift froze on the day Andy received the gift and no additional idiosyncratic experientially derived meanings were built up or were shared between Andy and Ann. In other words, the watch stayed unused and did not evoke richly textured webs of personal memories (Belk 1991). Richins (1994b) suggested that the symbolic and emotional meanings and values of the possession are only enhanced through

interaction. Unfortunately, Andy had never used it. *"You expect somebody will use your gift... for certain period of time ...to build up a relationship and memory... or to leave some marks, trace or scratches. Even though it is old and scratchy, there is some memory left."*

> S: *"The other watch... I bought for my ex-husband as a wedding gift. Well... can I say that? We chose the rings together. Actually, I designed the rings. I am talking about secret presents. I gave it to him on our wedding night. He was really surprised. But he thought it was too expensive and did not like it. It was not really that expensive. I can't remember exactly... not more than HK\$ 10,000 (£700). But it was in the 80s. Maybe he thought it was expensive... and waste of money... Because he thought it was too expensive, he did not use it at all... not because of robbery... it is because he tried to avoid any scratches. Never use it... never! It lost the meaning of the watch. In my opinion, it is meaningless if he did not use it.*

Divorce, one of the major transitions in a person's life, often implies the loss of an old self and the birth of a new one (Metcalf and Huntington 1991). In Ann's case, she was the one who initiated the divorce and was happy to disconnect from her old undesired self as an obedient and dependent woman and to welcome her new desired self as an independent woman who follows her dream and does something she have always longed for. It was a shock for her husband because he had been *"investing"* a lot on her and could not believe that she wanted to divorce him. The relationship with her husband went sour and her mother was very upset with Ann's decision. However, Ann believed she made the right decision and finally could pursue something she always wanted to do – studying the Arts.

> S: *It is alright. Because he was upset... he spent so many years... kind of investment on me. But at the end, I decided to divorce him. He said, "if I would have known that you would divorce me, I would not have spent so much time and money on you". At that time, I thought if those things meant so much to him, take everything... I don't mind.*
>
> P: *Did your mum say anything about that?*
>
> S: *My mum still nags about it. Forget it... never mind. The most important thing is that we were happy when we were apart. As long as he is happy, I didn't mind.*

Ann continued her third possession story about a watch that she bought and gave to her ex-boyfriend Ben revealing her past relational dimension of the self. Once again, Ann did not

own the watch but regarded it as one of her important possessions. Passing through her life transition stage from marriage to divorce, Ann met her ex-boyfriend, Ben after her divorce who shared the same interest and passion in arts. This watch reminded Ann of her pleasant time with Ben in the past and the important influence he had in Ann's life in terms of interest in Arts. Ann was happy to find somebody whom she could share her passion for the Arts with. Ben is very knowledgeable in arts and gave her a lot of inspiration, techniques and suggestions how to pursue her interest and passions in getting a degree in the Arts. The gift-giving served as a strengthening relational effect in that dating stage (Ruth et al. 1999).

> S: "The other watch that the size is big with a thick front case glass, like a magnifier. The watch is quite expensive... but it is not worth of that price. It is not very well-known... it is a fashion brand watch... not very well-known. I bought 2, but they are not in pair. I bought one for myself and the other one with blue straps for my first boyfriend after my divorce. He was my art tutor in the evening school. We both share the same passion in arts. He taught me a lot about techniques and skills... it was him who encouraged me to get a degree in Arts."

Sadly, Ann found out that he was married and cheated on their relationships. Ann did not want to continue this unhealthy relationship and it took her a few years to end this relationship with him. On the one hand, Ann loved him and was grateful that Ben helped her to pursue her dream. On the other hand, she was hurt that he had lied to her about his marital status. She wanted to disconnect herself from that particular relationship by disliking the watch. The original meaning of affection and appreciation is still there together with new additional symbolic and emotional meanings of betrayal attached to it. Ann tried to detach herself from wearing the watch in order to disconnect the feelings towards Ben. The memories with Ben (or the watch for Ben) mark a special stage of Ann's journey of being an artist.

> S: "I was silly enough to believe he is going to divorce his wife to marry me. We even once went on a holiday in Australia while he lied to his wife. I felt really bad and didn't want to destroy anybody's marriage... didn't want to continue... struggled for few years with this relationship... just gave it up... too much pain... I initially like the

watch very much. But...but because of him, I don't wear it any more... I didn't know he was married at that time."

The fourth story about her important possessions, her used-watch as a gift to her current Egyptian boyfriend, Asad, reveals her present relational dimension of the self as a woman who is in love with her current boyfriend. They met a few years ago during her field trip in Egypt. This long distance relationship has grown steadily. They were in the stage of enhancing, strengthening and cultivating their relationship (Ruth et al. 1999) and Ann wanted to give Asad something to signify their togetherness and connectedness. Ann gave the watch she wore to Asad to signify a strengthening relational effect in this dating stage and continued to regard it as one of her important possessions. In contrast to Andy, her ex-husband, Ann hoped that Asad would use the watch often and added new meanings to the gift through interaction (Richins 1994b). This watch not only signifies the beginning of their dating relationship in the past, and the more towards their status as a stable couple at present but also projects their commitment and desire to stay together and get married in the future (Andersen 1993).

S: "I met him in Egypt while I was travelling there to get some inspirations about Islamic cultures. I took a subject called Philosophy of Religion at the uni and want to understand Islamic culture more. So I went there alone. I met him in a souvenir shop. He is a shopkeeper there. He was nice very nice to me and took me around. His friends are nice too. That's how we met... I miss him... 2 years ago. I wore that watch when I was in Hong Kong in the summer time. Then I went to Egypt to see my boyfriend who once wore my watch when I was there. I thought it suited him very well. So I decided to give it to him... He is planning to come to the UK after I finish my studies here. I will do my Master's degree in London while he will come to live with me in London for a year. We are planning to get married afterwards."

Gift-giving can be a communicative device and a tangible way to exercise one's filial piety to their parents (Yau et a l 1999). The last story of Ann's important possession is linked to her mother. This gift serves an affirming relational effect that helped to maintain their familial intimacy (Ruth et al. 1999). Ann always wants to please her mother, for example, buying a

"more decent, beautiful, expensive... not that normal" watch for her mother and being an obedient and dependent girl who is *"always a good girl at home listening to her"*. However, the old self of being *"a good girl"* who followed people's advice is replaced by her new self of being true to herself following her passion but maybe a rebellious girl in her mother's eyes. Ann's mother had no choice but to accept the changes in her, e.g. quitting her job as a dentist, studying by herself in a foreign country, being divorced and dating a foreign boyfriend *"I guess now she is always worried about me"*.

> *S: I can't remember. I bought it from City Chain. My mum complained that all her watches were too small. She couldn't really see the time. I thought I would buy something more expensive. But you know mothers... they don't want you to spend so much money. She just criticised that this one was bad and that one was horrible. Finally, she chose the one I didn't like that much. But the price is relatively cheap and the front case is big enough for her to see time. I wanted to buy something more decent, beautiful, expensive... not that normal. But she did not want to. Mothers are like that. Mum always thinks about my benefits... the best for me...no... no... what she thinks it is the best for me...the best school, the best university, the best career... she is always nice to me and want to achieve the best. I am always a good girl at home listening to her. I guess now she is always worried about me since I am not in Hong Kong, divorced and have an Egyptian boyfriend."*

To summarize, Ann's important possession stories reveal her changes in self-development (Thompson 1997) in terms of her relationships with close others emphasizing her relational dimension of the self. The theme of "caring for others" through gift-giving is dominant in her narratives. Similar to Alan, almost all Ann's important possessions are gifts that she had *given* to her significant others (i.e. the *extended possessions* as marked * in Figure 8.1) suggesting Ann has a broader sense of self-possession boundary.

Ann's ex-husband, ex-boyfriend, current boyfriend and her mother play important roles in forming her self-definition. As Figure 8.1 shows, Ann's personal self is completely overlapped by incorporating her deceased cat, her ex-husband, her ex-boyfriend, her current boyfriend and her mother within her self. No story relating to her collective dimension of the self was revealed in her stories. As a result, the collective dimension of the self is not present to overlap with Ann's personal self. Her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the complete relational self-configuration.
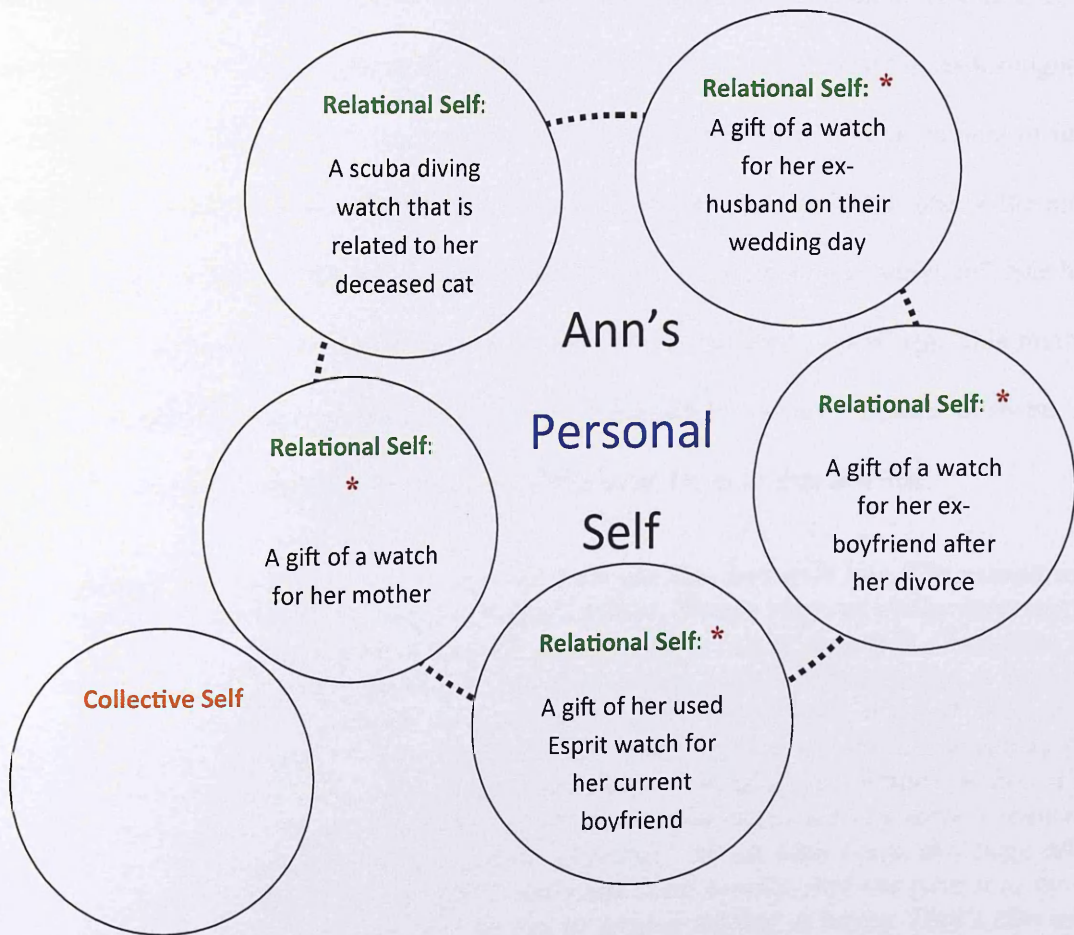
Figure 8.1: Ann's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

*= Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their possessions

8.2.2 Informant 12: Renay

8.2.2.1 Renay's Life Narrative

Renay is a 35-year-old behavioural analyst currently working and living in the US with her husband, Joe. She grew up in Hong Kong with her younger sister, Penny and her parents. Her father was a composer who passed away 15 years ago and her mother is a professor in music who currently lives in Taiwan. Her sister, Penny also lives near Renay's house in the US. Renay's life story presents a contrast between being powerless in her *"pathetic"* childhood and being powerful and optimistic and facing all challenges in her adulthood. She tried to focus on her positive happy memories in the past. She projects herself as a fighter throughout her life stories *"Falling down more, you'd get tougher"*. Renay spent a large amount of time in the interview narrating her childhood and her relationship with her father, one of the most important men in her life. Renay's childhood was *"a mixture of happiness and pain"*. She had a fun loving father who unfortunately had several affairs outside his marriage. This marital discord unsettled the peace in the family. Although her father was not a faithful husband, he was a fun, loving and caring father who provided a lot of fun activities at home.

> Renay: "My relationship with my dad. I am always close with him. The reason why my sister and I are so creative is because of him. We are eager to giving surprises to one another. It is because of him. He always gave us lots of surprises. Sometimes, he put a small card in my pencil case. My sister always gives lots of surprises to me from time to time. For example, once we came back from school, my dad gave us 2 envelopes and said "I got a treasure hunt for you". Then we started searching for treasure. Another time when I put on my shoes, I found a card written by him. For example, my sis bought a beautiful notebook. My dad would secretly write a sentence in one of the pages "what a beautiful notebook!" My sis later found that page after my dad passed away. She burst into tears and cried heavily. And she gave it to me to look and said "daddy wrote it". He was so good at making us happy. That's also why he was good at chasing women."

However, Renay's painful memories in her childhood were linked to her father's affairs with women. He had several affairs that caused a lot of pain in the family. Due to the family discord, Renay, who was only 7 years old, needed to be protected from all the family disputes.

Unfortunately, she had no choice but to face all the complicated disputes in the family. Her parents were constantly arguing while Renay was trying her best to protect her younger sister from all the traumatic experience of parents' marital discord.

> *Renay: "I still remember I have lots of rubber bands in my pencil case. When my parents quarrelled, I would put the rubber bands around the metal pencil case and pretended playing guitar to my sis in order to distract her (Penny). I still remember when I was playing the guitar, I was sweating and tried to listen to what they [parents] were saying. I was only 7 years old. I was so protective to my sis. She (Penny) didn't remember the family disputes that well. Also, I was the one trying to distract her when things turned sour. I tried to protect her from being affected by the situation. She knows that. So... my stomach... I had serious stomach ache when I was at primary school. I was always nervous."*

Renay had a vivid memory of the year when she was only seven years old. She called it *"the most pathetic time"*. During that year, she witnessed her mother's suicide attempt and experienced separation from her mother. Both Penny and Renay still tried their best to beg their parents not to split up. Her mother in the end decided to leave the girls behind and went to Taiwan when Renay was about 12 years old because her mother did not want to cause any further damage to the girls by arguing with their father. After their mother's departure, Penny and Renay were brought up by a Philipino maid, Adalina who was hired by their father.

> *Renay: "I still remember once mum had a knife with her and she took me to the kitchen. She said dad loved me most and she wanted to die together with me. I was very little. I pleaded "mummy, please... please... no..." Of course mum didn't do it. I guess she was so desperate at that spilt second. That was the reason she left us. She was so desperate and didn't want to have any tragedy in the family. She chose to leave us to go to Taiwan. I remember my sis and I recorded a tape to mum and dad with a sad music at the background. I even wrote scripts. It was quite funny (Renay and the interviewer both laughed). We said "Please... please... please". We told them that we were cold.*
>
> *Interviewer: "What do you mean "cold"?*
>
> *Renay: "Our hearts were shivering. We asked them not to split up. We don't feel any warmth in the family. After listening to the tape, mum hugged us tightly and wanted to start all over again. I wrote something in the diary. I always remember things when I was 7. That was the most pathetic time."*

When Renay grew older, she witnessed her mother's second suicide attempt. Renay felt sorry for her mother but at the same time, Renay blamed her for not spending any time with them. Looking back, she started to understand the pain her mother had felt and the reasons she had left them behind. The pain was too much for her mother to bear.

> Renay: "I once witnessed my mum's suicide attempt. She was already living in Taiwan. Mum was already outside the window and Adalina and dad tried to pull her back (note: she started to cry). I was by the door. It was in the middle of the night. Dad screamed and Adalina went to have a look. The bedroom door was opened. I was there by the door. I feel sorry for mum. I sometimes blame her not to spend time with us. But... I asked her "can you be happy or at least try to be happy with us every time you come back from Taiwan?" How can she be happy with that kind of situation? Now I am somebody's wife and realized how hard it was for mum. I understand her pain. I told Joe (her husband) that my mum was so great. Who wanted to leave their own children? Mummy loved us so much that she knew that if she would have stayed with us in Hong Kong while dad was having affairs. She would have damaged even more in terms of our childhood. Therefore, she chose to leave."

The pain caused by her father was finally over when he passed away 15 years old. Renay moved to Taiwan to live with her mother while enrolling herself at university in Taiwan. At the age of 22, Renay faced another challenge in her life. She was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Renay was sad that she had stomach cancer and wrote "why me" in her notebook. In a split second, she, with her fighter spirit, rewrote from "why me" to "why not me" and decided to fight it and not to be defeated by it.

> Renay: "Back to the story in Taiwan, the doctor told my mum that she is just 22 years old but her stomach is like 70 years old. The doctor was very angry and asked what kind of environment was she in. Mum didn't know that it was because of their quarrels... Mum had a huge reaction and said "she is a happy girl. She had a happy childhood" But I wanted to tell her that my childhood wasn't that happy. But she didn't know."

> Renay: "The doctor said the stomach situation is related to stress and eating habit... The doctor put the tube into the stomach. It was dark... full of bad cells. He was so shocked and asked whether I was mentally abused. Mum of course denied. But in the way, it was a mental abuse. They [parents] didn't want us to know their marriage problem. But I knew...I feel really blessed. I always think I have everything. I am lucky and I should be happy. When the doctor said I had cancer, I had no regret. At

the beginning, I wrote down "why me?" and then used another pen wrote "why not me?" in my notebook."

Renay went to the US to pursue her studies in Communications and met her husband, Joe from the same university. They were dating for several years. Marital discord has significant impact on children that potentially influences their own attitudes towards marriage (Gable et al. 1992). Although Renay did not believe in marriage due to her family discord, she decided to marry Joe in 2005. For Renay, compared with her complicated childhood, the relationship with Joe is burden-free. *"The relationship is burden-free.... He helps me change my perspective and not to carry too much burden."*

> Renay: *"Everybody said that Joe is pure... I can trust him. He also told me there are lots of temptation in China and Taiwan. When men go back to do business, they easily fall into the trap of having an affair. But he said he is not interested in it... It (her parents' marriage) does affect my marriage. There are many times... whatever happens, it happens. I didn't want to get married. Only Joe wanted to. Then again, I love him and want to show him I love him. I don't believe in marriage. It is ok to have it. But I don't believe it."*

Renay's childhood was complicated and she felt powerless. She did not have the choice to be born into a problematic family and to have a stomach cancer at a young age. However, all these negative impact and experiences made her a strong person. *"Falling down more, you'd get tougher"*.

> Renay: *"He was a wonderful dad but he also caused a lot of pain to us. But because of him, we had a good childhood. After he had a girlfriend... having an affair... he didn't take care of us.... it was mainly the Filipino maid who took care of us. He didn't come home after having an affair. I got hurt because of daddy... not because of the person... it was because what he did. Because of his affair, mummy left us. He broke our family into pieces. Mummy was much forgiving. Children always forgive their dads."*

Renay refused to take the role of the *"pathetic"* loser with negative emotion and give up on her life. In contrast, she gains control and power by projecting her sense of self as a optimistic fighter with positive emotion who is not afraid of challenges, she focuses on the

positive and keeps looking forward in her life. *"I chose my path and go for it. I would not think back and forth... You can say that I had a happy childhood because I chose to take the happy part to remember... to appreciate. The sad part of my childhood... I try not to touch it."*

> Renay: *"This is the whole growing-up process. I am proud of myself. The process was quite painful. But... Falling down more, you'd get tougher... I am lucky coz I am not pessimistic. When I look back my life, I had so many unhappy memories. When I was diagnosed that I had cancer, I could have already given up. In lots of points of my life, I could have said I was so pathetic and didn't want to continue any more. But I am very optimistic...I didn't have the complicated mind to hide it. I just think I accept what I experienced and had.... I am scared to touch my past. So what if I understand myself. I still have to move forward and continue my path. I know I always make smart choices and know my life will be ok."*

8.2.2.2 Analysis of Renay's Stories about Her Important Possessions: the Complete Relational Self-Configuration

As Table 8.4 shows, the things that Renay regarded as important possessions are all linked to her relational dimension of the self. Renay's five stories of her important possessions revealed two important identities in her life, the daughter of her deceased father and the wife of her husband. Renay narrated three stories of her important possessions, i.e. a Mickey Mouse watch, a "good-day-starts-in-the-morning" watch and her father's jade, that were linked to her deceased father in a disconnected relationship. The other two stories of her important possessions, i.e. a "moon and the sun" watch and their engagement watches that were related to her husband, Joe, presented an existing on-going relationship. In contrast to Ann's main theme of "caring for close others" in her narratives, the theme of "cared for by close others" was dominant in Renay's narratives when telling her possession stories. There was no story relating to her personal and collective dimensions of the self. Her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the complete relational self-configuration.

In terms of self-possession boundary, all Renay's possessions are gifts that she received from her deceased father and her husband and there was no possession story that she bought for herself (self-gifts) or gifts that she had given to close others. Table 8.4 summarizes Renay's stories about her important possessions that are linked to the possession themes and the trichotomization of the self.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Renay's Important Possessions
Personal Self	-	-
Relational Self	Enhancing and strengthening relationship with her husband	1) A gift of a "the moon and the sun" watch from her husband
		2) Engagement watches
	Affirming familial relationship with her father	1) A gift of a "good days start in the morning" watch from her father
		2) A gift of a Mickey Mouse watch from her father
	Memories in the past with specific person(s)	1) A gift of a "the moon and the sun" watch from her husband
		2) Engagement watches
		3) A gift of a "good days start in the morning" watch from her father
		4) A gift of a Mickey Mouse watch from her father
		5) Her father's jade
	Re-membering the deceased loved ones	Her father's jade
Collective Self	-	-

Table 8.4: Renay's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Renay's father passed away 15 years ago. However, she still feels very close to her father. Although her father caused a lot of pain in the family, Renay chose to remembered good memories of her happy childhood with her father. Three important possessions that are linked to her father mark three different stages in Renay's life: the peaceful and happy memories before the family discord; good memories with her father before his sudden death; and searching for a way to include her father in her life after his death.

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Renay's first important possession was a watch that she received from her father marked the rite of passage in her life and reflected her relational dimension of the self. Choosing a watch she liked and receiving it as a gift from her father, she had a good feeling like being a *"grown-up"*. This watch not only symbolized a close father-daughter relationship but also linked to their happy and peaceful moments before all the family discord when she had felt loved and secured. Renay was a happy and secure child who received a lot of love and attention from her father at that time.

> *Renay: "My first watch was a Mickey Mouse that I got when I was in primary school. I think I was around 5 or 6 years old. I remembered my dad took me to that kind of traditional watch smith... not that kind of watch counters at department store. He told me that I could choose a watch for myself. Then I chose this one. The Mickey Mouse watch. Why do I remember it so well? Coz I remember that I felt like a "grown up"... can have a watch. That's why I remember... A watch should be given by your parents so that you can always remember it for the rest of your life. Cos children will always remember the first watch they own. I remember... I remember the moment I went into the store... it was a dim... dark store and there was an old man sitting there. And then I chose a watch."*

Renay's second important possession is another watch that she received from her father as a gift just before her father's sudden death and links to her relational dimension of the self. This watch was given to Renay as part of a special ritual of reaching adulthood. It was a milestone for Renay that symbolized her adulthood. Instead of Renay choosing a watch by herself like her first Mickey Mouse watch, this time her father chose one with a special meaning on the front case of the watch "a good day starts in the morning" reminding Renay of cherishing time and seizing the day.

> *Renay: "My second watch is the one I got when I was 18. It was not a birthday present. Or maybe a birthday present... anyway, it was from my dad again. The watch... that time... there was a famous ad about that watch... It's like "A good day starts in the morning" It is not a famous brand. It is from City Chain [a watch shop]. Dad chose "morning" series for me. It is like a milestone."*

Renay narrated her third possession story about a horse jade that her father used to carry in his pocket and that reveals her relational dimension of the self as a daughter of her father.

Renay's father died from a stroke while Renay was doing her high-level (similar to A-level) examination. Renay did not have the chance to say goodbye to him. The horse shape jade symbolizes her father's presence and had a sacred meaning for Renay connecting her to her father (Belk et al. 1989). In the context of disconnected relationships, Renay used a strategy of "re-membering" her father on a different level (Myerhoff 1982). "The parent may be dead, but the relationship did not die" (Silverman and Nickman 1993: 315). Over time, she learned how to find a way to include her father in their life (Nasim 2007).

> Renay: "Hmm... now I can remember my dad's horse shape jade. He always had it with him. I received it from the hospital when he died. It was with him when he died... But once he died... I felt like I grew up in one day. I was more mature than people with the same age...I just took it out yesterday and touched it...What we remember our childhood is the time we played with dad. Mum always feels this is so unfair. I know she is not happy. It hurts. But what I said was truth... my experience. All the fun part is from dad."

Apart from possessions that are linked to her deceased father, Renay's also narrated two other stories about her important possessions, i.e. a "the sun and the moon" watch and engagement watches that are related to her husband, Joe in an existing on-going relationship. Renay narrated her fourth possession story about "the sun and the moon" watch that signified her relationship with Joe. In this existing on-going relationship, the epiphany of these possessions not only marked their history in the past and represented their current state, but also projected a promising future together. The symbolic and emotional meanings and values of these possessions were enhanced through interactions (i.e. wearing or using the important gifts on different occasions) (Richins 1994b). The watch signified Renay's burden-free self as Renay felt that her life was getting simpler after meeting Joe as he did not know much about Renay's past *"a fresh start" "a burden free relationship"*. They focused together not only on the past and the present and also looked forward to strengthening and cultivating a promising future together.

Renay: "There is one more. I got it from Joe. There are the sun and the moon on the watch front case. The sun comes out on day time and the moon comes out in the night time. It is quite an ugly watch. He said that he bought it because I love star. I think the watch is quite special. Even though it was ugly, I wore it. It was a fresh start...Joe didn't know much about my past. The relationship is burden-free. Joe is... for example once I dreamt about my dad and told Joe that dad was alive. But Joe said "Very good for you. He is alive in your dream." That's Joe. He is very practical. He helps me keep my "feet on the ground". He helps me change my perspective and not to carry to much burden. The significance of the watch is a "fresh start".

From dating to engagement, Renay's last important possession about their engagement watches revealed her sense of a secure self when she was engaged with Joe. *"I felt like I belonged to somebody. I was not lonely anymore."* Renay had been a strong but insecure elder sister who protected her younger sister from all family discord. But now, Renay has Joe to share her life with and to give her a sense of security and protection. Renay finally has someone to keep *"her feet on the ground"* and to share her burden. This lover set of watches marks the history of their engagement, their commitment and the new chapter of their lives together.

Renay: "The next one is our engagement watches. I was 30 at that time. Joe planned a trip to Vegas. We were living in different city at that time. We were so poor... no money. We went to Vegas to watch Mammamia show. After the show, it was 12 midnight. He wrote "Happy birthday on my hand". We went to have a relatively expensive steak dinner before going to see the show. On the way back, he... he ... asked me to look at the sky for something. When I look at him, he had a diamond ring in his hand... shaking... He said "will you marry me? It was so sweet that night. But then we had to say goodbye at the airport. The feeling of being engaged is much stronger than being married with him. I felt like I was belonged to somebody. I was not lonely any more. I bought a lover set of watches, one for him and one for me after we signed the paper at the registry office. The brand is Guess... stainless steel. He is still wearing it. I don't know where mine is."

To summarize, Renay's important possession stories reveal her changes in self-development in different life stages (Thompson 1997) in terms of her relationships with her deceased father and her husband, emphasizing her relational dimension of the self. The theme of "cared by close others" through the gifts she received is dominant in her narratives. Meaningful relationships with her deceased father and her husband result in including them in the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). As Figure 8.2 shows, Renay's personal self is completely overlapped by incorporating her deceased father and her husband within her self. There was no story relating to her collective dimension of the self. As a result, the collective dimension of the self does not overlap with Renay's personal self. Her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the complete relational self-configuration.
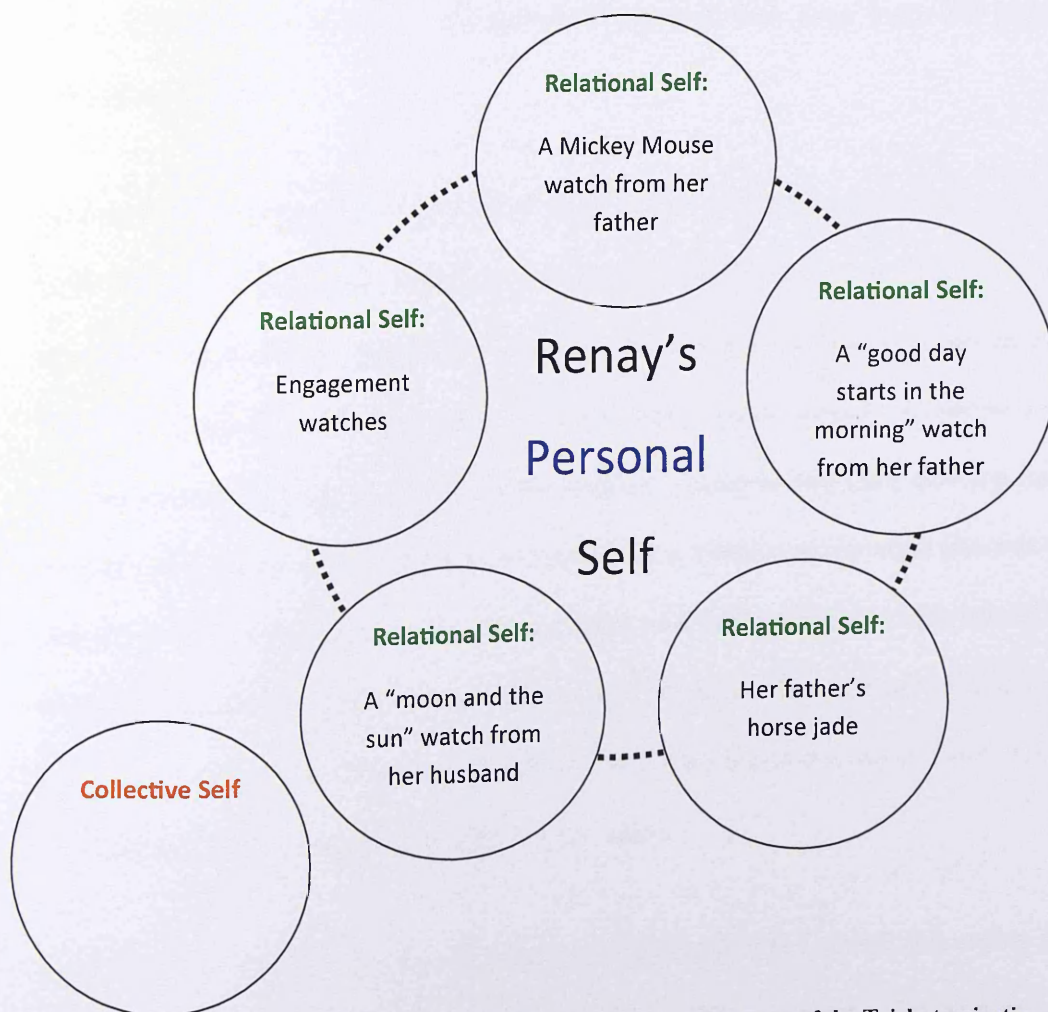
Figure 8.2: Renay's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

8.2.3 Informant 13: Lucy

8.2.3.1 Lucy's life narrative

Lucy is a 33-year-old high school music teacher who grew up in a family with six older sisters and her parents. She is the youngest in the family. The age gap between Lucy and her sisters ranges from 15 years to 6 years. She enjoys being the youngest in the family, being taken care of by the others and she always received a lot of attention, care and love. Her father used to be a minibus driver and is now retired whereas her mother is a housewife. The family was not all that well off but had enough to provide for basic needs of the children. Lucy had a happy childhood. Unlike other traditional Chinese parents, her parents were laid-back about their children's education and did not force them to study hard for examinations. The parents only wanted their children to be happy with their lives. Lucy is a laid back and optimistic woman.

Among all the siblings and relatives, her *"big brother"* cousin is always Lucy's favourite. He is 20 years older than Lucy. When Lucy was a little girl, he bought many toys for her. Lucy also is very fond of this *"big brother"* cousin as there is no other brother figure in the family. The *"big brother"* cousin took Lucy to *"zoos, playgrounds, movies, swimming pools, and outings in Saigong"*, etc. In addition, *"big brother"* cousin helped Lucy develop her interest in music and encouraged her to play by buying her a Yamaha piano when she was ten years old. Later this interest became Lucy's occupation as a music teacher in high school. Lucy is very thankful for what *"big brother"* did to her. However, due to some misunderstandings and family disputes, the *"big brother"* cousin left Lucy's house one day without explaining to her what had happened and never visited Lucy again.

Lucy met Winston, her then-boyfriend and now-husband in the church fellowship when she was 15 years old. They dated for several years. Then Winston pursued his studies in the UK

while Lucy studied for an education diploma, to become a school music teacher. Separation made them stronger in their relationship. Lucy and Winston were finally married in 1999 and are now trying to save up some money to buy an apartment of their own.

Lucy's life story is about being surrounded and protected by people's love and care. She was born as the youngest child in the family and loved by six elder sisters and parents. *"Big brother"* cousin served a brotherly role and helped her develop her interest in music when she was a little girl. Later Lucy met her first boyfriend and now-husband, Winston who cherishes her and loves her very much.

8.2.3.2 Analysis of Lucy's Stories about Her Important Possessions: the Relationally-led Self-Configuration

As Table 8.5 shows, the things Lucy regarded as important possessions are largely linked to the relational dimension of the self and reflect on her identities as a wife being loved and cared by her husband, Winston, and as a cousin being spoiled by her *"big brother"* cousin. The possessions are also slightly related to her ability in music, revealing her personal dimension of the self. There was no story relating to the collective dimension of her self. Her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration.

Lucy enjoys being taken care of as the youngest in the family and surrounded by people who love her, i.e. her husband, parents and sisters. Her possession theme in her narratives revolves mainly around her memories of her husband from the past to the present revealing her affiliated relational dimension of the self. In addition, Lucy showed her sadness towards her disconnected relationship with her *"big brother"* cousin in the past and her joy in reconnecting in the relationship with him in more recent times in her possession story about the piano when she had received from her *"big brother"* cousin. Table 8.5 summarizes Lucy's

stories about her important possessions that are linked to the possession themes and the trichotomization of the self.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Lucy's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Self-expression	A gift of piano received from her "big brother" cousin
Relational Self	Enhancing and strengthening relationship with Winston	1) A gift of a scuba diving watch for Winston
		2) The lover set of Titus watches
		3) Their engagement rings
	Affirming familial relationship with her cousin	A gift of piano received from her "big brother" cousin
	Memories of the past with specific person(s)	1) A gift of a scuba diving watch for Winston
		2) A gift of piano from her cousin
		3) The lover set of Titus watches
		4) Their engagement rings
Collective Self	-	-

Table 8.5: Lucy's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

In terms of her self-possession boundaries, Lucy regarded a gift that she had received from her cousin (e.g. a piano) and some other objects that she bought together with her husband (e.g. the lover set of Titus watches and their engagement rings) as her important possessions. In addition, Lucy considers the gift of a scuba diving watch that she had *given* to her husband on a special occasion as her amongst her important possessions (i.e. the *extended possession*) suggesting Lucy has a broader view of the construction of her sense of self and possessions.

Lucy began by narrating her story about a piano that she had received as a gift from her "*big brother*" cousin. The piano symbolizes her past self as a happy little girl being cared for by her "*big brother*" cousin who played an important role of providing a positive influence in Lucy's childhood. "*He took me to zoos, playgrounds, movie, swimming pools, and outings in Saigong... so much fun... I learned a lot through him. He was very kind to me. In his ability, he would give whatever I want to have... very kind to me.*" In addition, he encouraged her to

develop her interest in piano playing and provided an environment for her to be who she is now, her present career self as a music teacher, linked to the personal dimension of the self. The piano signifies a special bond between Lucy and the *"big brother"* cousin. Unfortunately, this special relationship was involuntarily disconnected and Lucy regretted that she did not have a chance to understand what had happened or to say goodbye to him. Belk (1988) stated "if possessions are viewed as part of self, it follows that an unintentional loss of possessions should be regarded as a loss or lessening of self" (142). However, in Lucy's case, the possession (the piano) is still here but the significant person who gave the possession has left without any explanations. This led to a sense of loss in Lucy's self.

Twenty years later, they met each other again. Lucy's past self as a little girl in *"big brother"* cousin's eyes has turned to a happily married woman with a good occupation as a music teacher in the present time. Lucy's past lost self has finally reconnected with her *"big brother"* cousin and she hopes she will rebuild this relationship again in the future.

> Lucy: "Then... the piano... I got it from my "big brother" cousin. We don't have any contact any more. Some family dispute... We don't contact each other anymore. He was very nice to my family. I am the youngest one in the family. He took me to zoos, playgrounds, movie, swimming pools, and outings in Saigong... so much fun... I learned a lot through him. He was very kind to me. In his ability, he would give whatever I want to have... very kind to me. He was the "big brother" to me. I bumped into him once in my friend's Chinese banquet... 2 years ago. He didn't see me first. I was so nervous... couldn't eat... very nervous... I didn't know what to do... should I go there to say hello or what...what if he refused? We haven't seen each other for a long time...my husband noticed something was wrong. I told him. My husband took me there to him and we said hello. He was really happy to see me again and said I had grown a lot that... he couldn't recognise me... I was really happy but nervous to see him again. He is the same person, my nice "big brother"... less hair... a bit bald. We... hmm... at the end... exchanged our telephone numbers".

Apart from the piano, all other possession stories Lucy shared in the interview are related to her husband, Winston. Each possession marks a special stage in their relationship, like a love story signifying their desire to strengthen and cultivate their relationship from the past to the

present, and possibly constructing their promising future in the narratives. Lucy told her second story about a scuba diving watch that contains memories that link her to their past as a dating couples. Interestingly, the watch does not belong to Lucy. It was a gift that Lucy had bought for and *given* to Winston on his birthday and marked their beginning of their relationship (i.e. the *extended possession*). The meanings of the watch were enhanced through interactions (Richins 1994b) and took on "patina" (McCracken 1990). Winston used to wear it as often as he could. Although the price was cheap with no particular famous brand name, plus the watch does not function any more, Winston still keeps it in a safe place. The watch is a testimony on witness to their first date 15 years ago.

> Lucy: "The first one is the watch I bought for him (her husband). It was the first watch I bought for him when we just started dating. The price was quite cheap. It was no brand. It is like that kind of scuba diving watch that has a ring on the front case that you can turn. He didn't throw it away coz we thought it froze a special moment of that time... The watch is not working anymore but he still keeps it. It was 1991. 15 years ago. He likes it very much. We didn't have money. I didn't buy a lover watch set. I think it was his birthday or some other occasions. It was only one hundred something Hong Kong dollars."

Lucy continued telling her third story that recorded the development of their dating relationship. At one point, they were separated due to Winston's plan to pursue his studies in the UK. Lucy was very dependent on Winston from decision making to paying bills. Her identity as a very dependent girlfriend was in the process of changing during this period. That was the first time they had to be apart so that Lucy had to be strong and independent without Winston's presence. They bought a "lover set" of watches in order to confirm their love for one another and to remind themselves of their love and commitment. This lover set of Titus watches that had a slogan "Everlasting Love" in a TV commercial symbolized their love and they could wear them when they were apart. Lucy seldom throws away possessions that belong to them both as she cherishes them as parts of their history forming the web of ups and downs in the history of their relationship (Belk 1992, Olson 1985).

Lucy: "Then our lover watch set. We bought them at City Chain (note: a watch shop in Hong Kong). Nothing really special. Ahh! It is "Tian Chang Di Jiu" (Everlasting Love) (Note: The slogan of one of Titus watch in its advertisement). That advertisement...you know... with the male model... can't remember the name and Anita Mui (Hong Kong Chinese music pop star) on the TV commercial...the old Shanghai train station with glamour clothing... they were saying goodbye at the train station... before they were separated...I think... not sure... the guy gave the watch to Mui and said something about love forever. It is the effect of the advertisement... you know "Everlasting Love". It is a pair. I still have them and have not thrown them away."

Lucy's final story is about their engagement rings that she regarded as one of her important possessions. After being together for about 10 years, Lucy and Winston became engaged and are very content in their relationship. The engagement rings mark their history in the past, symbolize their commitment at present, and project a promising future together as a married couple (Kleine and Baker 2004). The rings are not just communicative objects that indicate their commitment. New meanings and interpretations will be added to these important objects through different incidents or interactions, like the following excerpt of how funny Lucy thought the incident of losing Winston's engagement ring (Richins 1994b). Lucy used to be the careless one who needs Winston to help her and to take care of her, whereas Winston is the man who is always right and never makes any mistakes. However, Lucy found this incident funny because she realized their roles switched in this story.

Lucy: "Hmm... you know... the story of our engagement ring. Ding... ding... ding... drop into water. Winston is sometimes quite overprotective... and tells me what to do and what not to do... quite opinionated...he always thinks he is right... but not always... We were sitting on some big rocks on a shore. We got our engagement rings 2 days ago. We were sitting on a rock. Then out of the blue, he said "Watch out and don't drop the ring". I said "OK...ok...ok ". I was not playing with my ring. After saying that sentence, he was playing with his ring and all of the sudden it fell off... ding... ding... ding... and drop in between rocks. It was on Autumn festival evening. It was dark. He used a torch to look for it between rocks. He tried to fetch it but it was too deep to reach. So... forget it... he then bought a new one. I said to him "You asked me to be careful. And look at you..." It was funny and most memorable."

To summarize, Lucy's important possession stories reveal her stable self-development (Thompson 1997) in terms of her relationship with her husband. She did not have any

contrasting or conflicting dilemmas in her stories that were linked to her husband. Lucy is satisfied and enjoys being taken care of by Winston. In addition, Lucy was cared by her "big brother" cousin when she was a little girl and had wonderful memories of him. Her predominant possession theme in her stories is related to her as being loved and cared for by her significant others. Apart from a story about her piano that is linked to both her music ability and her relationship with her cousin, almost all Lucy's important possessions are linked to her significant others reflecting her relational dimension of the self. Lucy defines herself mainly through her relationships with them. Lucy regarded "big brother" cousin and her husband as part of her self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). As Figure 8.3 shows, Lucy's personal self is completely overlapped by incorporating Winston and her "big brother" cousin within her self. Lucy did not have any stories that are linked to the collective dimension of the self. As a result, the collective dimension of the self does not overlap with Lucy's personal self. Her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration.

In terms of her self-possession boundary, Lucy's important possessions included gifts that she had received from her "big brother" cousin and her husband and objects she had bought together with her husband. In addition, Lucy considered the birthday gift of a watch that she had given to Winston as one of her own important possessions (her *extended possession)* (as marked * in Figure 8.3).

Relational Self:

*A scuba diving watch for Winston

Relational Self:

A Piano from her "big brother" cousin

Lucy's

Personal Self

- A piano – her music ability

Relational Self:

The lover set of Titus watches

Relational Self:

Lucy and Winston's engagement rings

Collective Self:
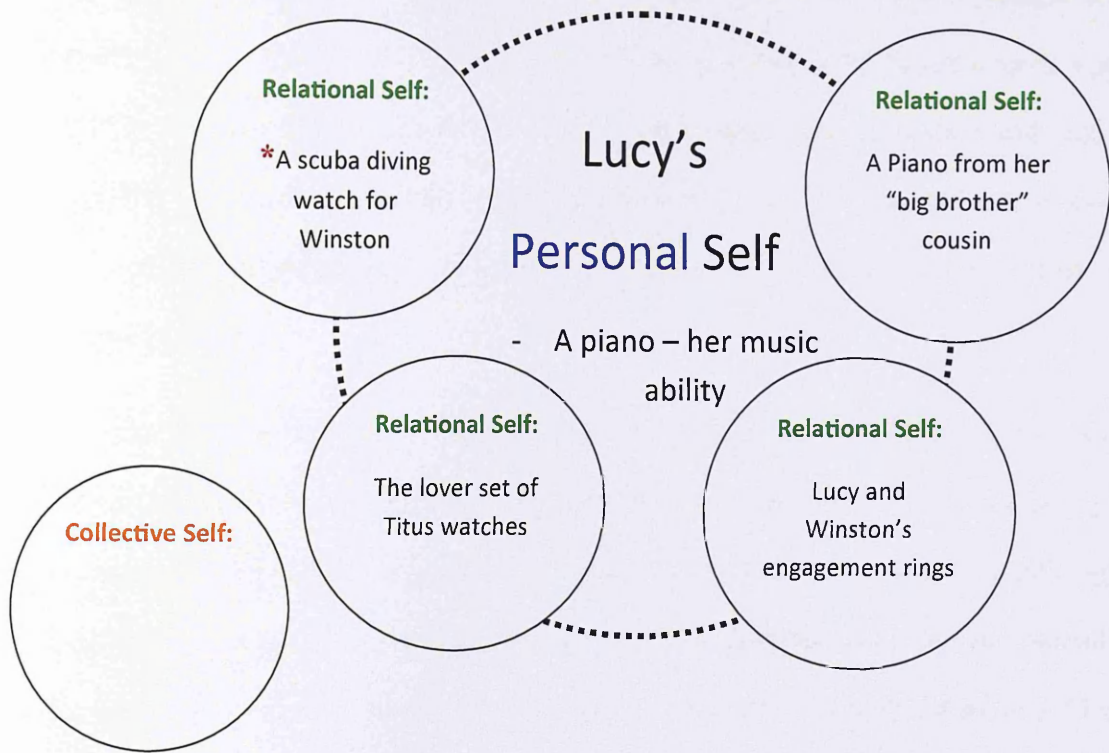
Figure 8.3: Lucy's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

*= Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their possessions

8.2.4 Informant 14: Jake

8.2.4.1 Jake's Life Narrative

Jake is a 39-year old accountant who is the eldest son in the family, with a younger brother and two sisters. His father is a welder and his mother is a housewife. He grew up on a public housing estate. His father worked very hard in order to support the four-child family and later supported Jake to study abroad in Australia. In addition, Jake is a devoted church member who attends Sunday worship and takes up some duties at church. He met most of his close friends at church.

Jake had a dream to study at university. Unfortunately, due to limited university places in Hong Kong, he did not get any offers after receiving his A-level results. After consulting with his parents, Jake decided to pursue his studies in New South Wales, Australia although he knew his parents could only support his first year of studies financially. Studying abroad was not easy for Jake. He took on different part-time jobs from washing dishes at a Chinese restaurant to selling ice cream in a park in order to pay off his tuition fees and to support himself. However, this tough experience in Australia shapes who he is at present.

> Jake: "After my experience in Australia, when you went through hard time... washing dishes in restaurants... the first year was hard. You had to put up with people's tempers. Then I found a job to sell ice-cream. I met people from all walks of life and learnt different things. . I learnt how to allocate time more effectively as I worked and studied at the same time. And I cherish things more. I also learn to be calm... smoothen my tempers now... I went to Australia and changed my life."

Jake met his wife, Shirley, in 2001 when both of them worked in the same airline company where Shirley was a flight attendant whilst Jake was an accountant. Both of them are active churchgoers and most of the friends they have are from the church. They were married in 2003.

8.2.4.2 Analysis of Jake's Stories about His Important Possessions: the Relationally-led Self-Configuration

As Table 8.6 shows, the things that Jake regarded as important possessions are linked to his personal and relational dimensions of the self. In terms of his personal dimension of the self, Jake told a story about his Oris watch that he has been wearing for more than 20 years, not only linking his memories of his friendships with his close friends but also symbolising his achievement in completing his challenge, completing his undergraduate degree, in Australia.

Most of his stories about important possessions are linked to the relational dimension of his self, for example, his relationships with his wife (Shirley) and his father. Jake narrated three possession stories that symbolized his relationship with his wife with a temporal sequence from the dating stage (a gift to Shirley - a limited Swatch Valentine's Day edition watch) through a special incident (a gift to Shirley - a diamond cross pendant) to their engagement (an engagement ring for Shirley). In addition, Jake reflected on his filial piety to his father by narrating a story about how he and his other siblings had bought a Rolex watch to celebrate his father's 60th birthday. There was no story relating to the collective dimensions of his self. His pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration. Table 8.6 summarizes Jake's stories about his important possessions that are linked to the possession themes and the trichotomization of the self.

In terms of self-possession boundary, all Jake's possession stories about his wife are gifts that he had bought for and *given* to her (e.g. a Swatch Valentine's watch, a diamond cross pendant and an engagement ring). In addition, Jake considered the birthday gift of a Rolex watch for his father as one of his own important possessions although the watch belongs to his father. Jake perceived all these gifts as his *extended possessions* suggesting Jake has a broader view of the construction of his sense of self and possessions.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Jake's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Achievement	An Oris watch received from friends
	Personal history	An Oris watch received from friends
	Utilitarian	A Swatch watch
Relational Self	Affirming familial or friendship relationships with others	1) An Oris watch received from friends
		2) A gift of a Rolex for his father on his 60th birthday
	Enhancing and strengthening relationship with Shirley	1) A gift of a limited Valentine's Day Swatch for Shirley
		2) A gift of a diamond cross pendent for Shirley
		3) An engagement ring for Shirley
	Memories of the past with specific person(s)	1) An Oris watch received from friends
		2) A Rolex for his father on his 60th birthday
		3) A gift of a limited Valentine's Day Swatch for Shirley
		4) A gift of a diamond cross pendent for Shirley
		5) An diamond engagement ring for Shirley
Collective Self	-	-

Table 8.6: Jake's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Jake's first story of his important possession, his Oris watch, reveals both his personal and relational dimensions of the self. Jake received his Oris watch from a group of friends just before he went to Australia to pursue his undergraduate studies. The original symbolic meaning of the gift was as a farewell gift from a group of friends signifying their good wishes, encouragement and support for Jake decision to study in Australia. Memories of friendship are the original and first layer of meaning in this important possession. This watch involved additional idiosyncratic experientially derived meanings through interactions (e.g. wearing it frequently) (Richins 1994b).

The idiosyncratic experientially derived meanings came from his personal experiences during the time he studied in Australia. The watch signifies one of the toughest times in his life, and he conquered the challenge and changed his perspective on life. He described that period

before he went to Australia as *"hit the hard bottom"* and going to Australia was the way out of the situation. This watch symbolises that he completed one of the most important challenges in his life *"Going to Australia... I had to have success to come back"* and this past experience (his past self) shaped who he is today (his present self). The symbolic and emotional meanings and values of the possession were interwoven through these interactions (e.g. studying for exams, working at a part-time job, solving problems alone) (Richins 1994b). The Oris watch is a milestone that marks his life turning point, his epiphany (Denzin 1989). Jake is proud that he conquered that challenge. His life changed after his studies in Australia. Over time, the meanings of this watch become idiosyncratic, singular and irreplaceable, intertwined with layers of meanings as the watch gradually took on "patina" (McCracken 1990).

> Jake: *"Before I left Hong Kong for Australia, I broke up with my girlfriend. Then, I could not further my studies in Hong Kong. That was the time I really hit the hard bottom. Going to Australia is like a way out. There were so many people supporting me. Do you remember many people saw me off at the airport? I think in a way, it was a support from them. At that time, I did not think that I could make it. So... it was a kind of support there. The meaning behind Oris ... I guess that time the burden I bore was huge. Going to Australia... I had to success to come back. And also the financial difficulties... The watch is a symbol that I completed that stage of challenge. I went to Australia and changed my life."*

In his narrative about the Oris watch, Jake also revealed how his spiritual self helped him through the hard time in Australia. In his narration, *"God took care of me and kept His eye on me"* was repeated constantly to reemphasize his strong faith in God. Using his spiritual lens at the present time to view his past experience in Australia, Jake was thankful for what he encountered and learned, for example, finding part-time jobs to support his studies, some help from the Chinese old lady and always adequate money to pay his tuition fees. Jake turned all the problems into blessings.

> Jake: *"God took care of me and kept His eyes on me that time. I knew that I only had money to support my first year study. Therefore, I had to find a job immediately once I*

arrive in Australia. I knew it in the beginning already. That is the reason why the watch means a lot to me. I didn't expect I could make it through... I was lucky that there was a Chinese lady who was so kind to me and provided me a place to stay. I found a job later. I was so much under pressure coz I had to work 3 days a week... full time. I got only 3 or 4 days to study. It was quite hard to catch up in the beginning. The results were not that great... just made it to the next level. The pressure was huge in the beginning. But God kept His eyes on me. One year, I didn't have enough money to pay my tuition fee. Every time when I faced some problems, say not enough money to pay my tuition. There was always a way. It was really weird. I bore a lot of pressure. I graduated. The whole process was ok. God kept His eyes on me very much. I only needed to find a job to support my daily expenses and mum paid for my tuition."

Jake views this watch as part of the self as who he was in the past and who he is now in the present. He uses the watch as often as he can and tries his best to maintain the watch in a good shape. As Belk notes (1988) "a relationship should exist between incorporation of an object into one's extended self and the care and maintenance of the object... The more an object is cathected into one's extended self, the more care and attention it tends to receive" (p. 158). In addition, Jake wants to pass the watch to the next generation (extending his future self to the next generation) as if he would like to pass on his stories to them. He valued this watch so much that he would like to pass on the watch as well as the symbolic meanings of it from generation to generation.

> *Jake: "The most precious possession... Oris, the watch. I really LIKE my Oris...This Oris was broken few times... the glass surface was cracked... I also changed the strap. I still keep this watch. I will pass it on from one generation to another. Apart from my wedding ring, this watch has a lot of memories."*

Jake shared his second story about his important possession – his Swatch watch that he only wears when he exercises (his sports self) that is linked to the personal dimension of his self. Possessions not only consist of symbolic and emotional meanings, but also contain utilitarian and instrumental meanings (Richins 1994b, Dittmar 1989, 1992). The watch symbolises his sports (or relaxed) self. Jake uses his watches to partition his different aspects of self. While Jake wears his Oris watch at work and other formal social gatherings or events (e.g. wedding banquets), he wears his Swatch when exercising, *"playing golf, doing some exercise and*

wearing some casual wears". Jake uses different watches to match his self-image on different occasions (Sirgy 1982). His Oris watch with a classic front case and a leather strap represents his serious and formal image at work whereas his Swatch watch with a plastic strap and colourful designs signifies his relaxed and causal lifestyle outside his work.

> *Jake: "And the other one is Swatch. It is for sports purpose, serves as a casual wear watch. I only wear this one when playing golf, doing some exercise and wearing some casual wears. I bought Swatch because I needed to do some sports but didn't want to have any scratches on Oris. Therefore, I bought a Swatch and my wife wanted one as well."*

Apart from the possessions that were linked to the personal dimension of his self, Jake narrated stories about three gifts that he had given to his then-girlfriend and now-wife, Shirley revealing his relational dimension of the self. Although these gifts (a limited Swatch Valentine's Day edition watch, a diamond cross pendant and an engagement ring) belong to Shirley, Jake considered them as among his important possessions. In Jake's view, possessions are not limited to what he has physically; there is psychological element of ownership as well.

Jake continued his third possession story about how he had acquired the gift of a limited Swatch Valentine's Day edition watch for Shirley (i.e. the *extended possession*) reflecting his relational dimension of the self. As Pierce et al. (2003) suggested one of the ways that individuals develop ownership feelings towards an object is through investing themselves (e.g. their time, money or effort) into the object. In Jake's case, he invested his effort, time and money to *"queue up"* to get this special watch for her on Valentine's Day (Sherry 1983). Jake used a tangible object to deliver an intangible important message embedded in the watch *"It's Valentine's Day and the watch says it all"*. The watch consists of both symbolic and emotional meanings of affection to Shirley. This gift-giving served as a strengthening of the

relational aspect at that dating stage in order to represent his affection and love for Shirley (Ruth et al. 1999: 387).

> *Jake: "I bought a Valentine's day Swatch edition to my wife. This one is the Valentine's Day edition. It was before we got married... we were still dating. It has a special meaning in it. It's Valentine's Day and the watch says it all. Every year you have to think about what to buy to your loved one to celebrate this special moment. I queued up and got it. You know... you always queue up for some kind of limited edition. Anyway, it is a limited edition."*

Jake narrated his fourth possession story about the gift of a diamond cross pendant for Shirley on her baptism (i.e. the *extended possession*) revealing his relational dimension of the self, a husband-wife relationship. In addition to the symbolic meaning of the necklace as a baptismal gift, there were additional lived experiences associated with this item, an incident of dropping the pendant down the sink, when both Jake and Shirley realize that it is better to solve problems together as *"husband and wife"* than alone. Jake's sense of ownership of this gift developed – "a lived relationship with the object" (Pierce et al. 2003: 93). The pendant cross carries not only the original culturally shared meaning of celebrating her baptism, but also an additional idiosyncratic experientially-derived meaning that they will always share (Ruth et al. 1999). The symbolic and emotional meanings and values of the possession were intertwined through different interactions and events (Richins 1994b). It helped them build up a stronger relationship. The cross diamond pendant carried meanings from the past and possible meanings in the future. In the future, if they face difficulties, they will remind themselves of this incident and how they had solved a problem in the past, i.e. an experience that had happened in the past carries a significant meaning for them in the future.

> *Jake: "I gave it to her on her baptism. It is very memorable value. For her... for her and me, it is very memorable. We experienced and learnt something from that incident. We learnt that it is always better to solve a problem together, i.e. a husband and wife, than a person alone... It is a necklace that we had a "lost and found" experience. It is a necklace with a pendant of a diamond cross. I gave that to her on her baptism. She likes it very much. The meaningful part is lost and found experience. One night she had a shower... before taking a shower, she took the necklace off and*

accidentally she dropped the pendant down the sink and it got stuck in the u-shape tube. She spent the whole night trying all kinds of methods to get it out but failed. Finally, she woke me up and told me with tears that "I am really sorry...". I was so worried. Then she told me that she dropped the pendant into the sink. Then we both tried again with all kinds of methods and finally got it out. I used a blue tack to get it out. It is so memorable. The necklace itself is very meaningful plus this incident we solved the problem together. She really cherishes the necklace. She wears it every day and never takes it off"

Jake shared his fifth possession story about an engagement ring that had given to Shirley (i.e. the *extended possession*) revealing that they had entered another life stage of their relationship. Possessions are like testimonies or milestones that mark different life events and transitions in people's lives. From dating to marriage proposal, Shirley and Jake got engaged in 2001. In order to have *"... exactly what I wanted... an unforgettable proposal"*, Jake as a gift-giver carefully searched for a ring, planned a surprise dinner and chose the right time and place to present the gift (Minowa and Gould 1999, Curasi 1999, Belk and Coon 1993, Otnes et al. 1993). Jake purchased a heart-shape diamond ring symbolising his affection for her and placed it in the middle of a bunch of flowers as a surprise for her. Then he chose the right place (a hotel room) and time (picking her up from the airport after her English summer course in Leeds). This engagement ring is *"a hallmark of close intimate relationship"* (Ruth et al. 1999) and indicates that they had been engaged in the past and were now married, working on building a solid foundation for their promising future together (Kleine and Baker 2004, Andersen 1993).

> *Jake: "Around HKD 10,000 something. The atmosphere (proposing to her) was really nice. I picked her up from the airport when she finished her English course in Leeds. I proposed to her with the ring and a bunch of flowers in the hotel. The ring was place in the middle of the bunch. The shape of the diamond is heart. She was really touched and surprised. That's exactly what I wanted... an unforgettable proposal! The ring has a special meaning. I want to marry her. I bought it."*

Jake's last possession story was about the gift of a Rolex watch for his father on his 60th birthday (i.e. the *extended possession*) that signifies his filial piety to his father, revealing

Jake's relational dimension of the self. In Jake's narrative, pleasing and satisfying his father by buying him an expensive Rolex watch was one of the ways to show his filial piety. Communication between a father and a son sometimes is quite implicit. Jake's father did not make his wish for Rolex explicitly. However, *"we (Jake and his siblings) knew he wanted to have one... We wanted to satisfy him."* Giving a gift to his father is an explicit and tangible way to show his care. This watch is viewed as an affirming empathetic gift (Ruth et al. 1999) so that Jake acted as a provider and had the "ability to see inside the recipient and to know just what he needs the most" (p. 390). Jake exercised his filial piety through gift-giving to his father as a sign of his respect.

> Jake: *"We (Jake and his siblings) bought a Rolex for dad on his birthday because he liked it. Dad used to have a Rolex... a steel strap... but got stolen. He was really upset. So we bought a new one for him. We bought it on his Big 60th birthday... He didn't say that he wanted one. But we knew he wanted to have one. He likes Rolex very much... the steel strap. We wanted to satisfy him. We (he and his siblings) could afford it so we bought it. Now when I look back, it really cost us a lot of money. I think it was HKD 5,000 per head."*

To summarize, Jake's important possession stories reveal different stages in his life and signify changes in his self-development (Thompson 1997). Apart from his stories that are linked to his wife and his father, Jake has an Oris watch that marked his achievement in the past studying in Australia, reflecting the personal dimension of his self. His relational dimension of the self is dominant in his possession stories. Almost all of his important possession stories that are linked to his close others are gifts that Jake bought and gave to his close others (i.e. the *extended possessions*) suggesting Jake has a broader view of his self-possession boundaries. In contrast, there were few stories that were related to his personal dimension of the self and no story revealing his collective dimension of the self. His pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration. As

Figure 8.4 shows, Jake's personal self is largely obscured by incorporating his wife and his father within his self.

In terms of his self-possession boundary, Jake's important possessions included gifts that he had bought for himself (self-gift), had received from his friends (e.g. his Oris watch) and had bought for and *given* to his father and his wife, i.e. the *extended possessions* (as marked * in Figure 8.4).
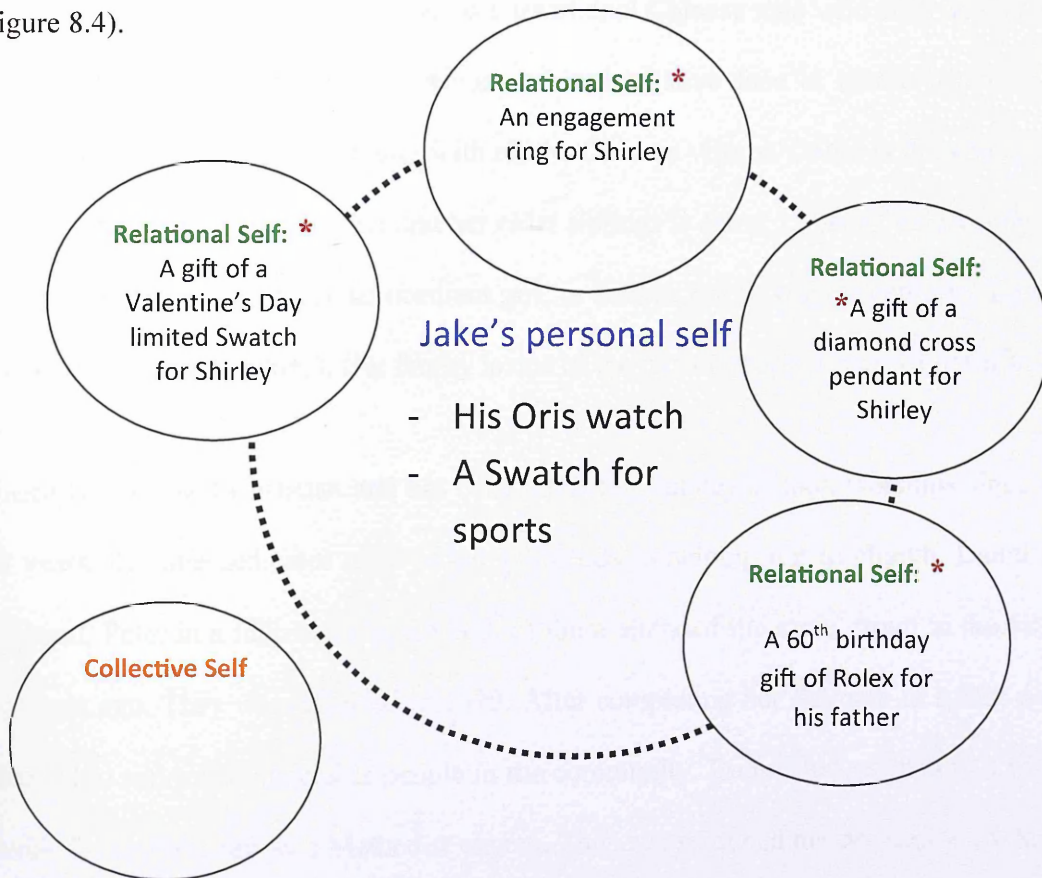
Figure 8.4: Jake's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

*= Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their possessions

8.2.5 Informant 15: Danni

8.2.5.1 Danni's Life Narrative

Danni is a 34-year old social worker for the elderly. She was educated in Hong Kong, lived in a public housing estate and grew up in a traditional Chinese family where sons are regularly preferred over girls. Her family consists of two elder brothers, one elder sister and her parents. Unfortunately, her eldest brother died 20 years ago. Her father is a retired welder and her mother is a housewife. Danni's father is a traditional Chinese man who does not speak much in the family and always has a serious and authoritative face at home, whereas Danni's mother is a kind and loving mother with all the Chinese virtues. Danni is the youngest in the family. The age gap between her and her elder siblings is about 15 years. At a young age, her parents taught her how to be an obedient girl, to behave and to respect authority figures (e.g. parents, elderly or teachers). Her family is one of the most important parts of her life.

Danni is a devoted Christian and has been attending Sunday school, worships since she was 10 years old. She dedicates most of her weekends to helping out in church. Danni met her husband, Peter in a fellowship when both of them attended the same group in the fellowship 20 years ago. They were married in 1999. After completing her diploma in social work, she decided to serve the vulnerable people in the community. Danni first worked in a foster care centre for children ran by a Methodist church. Then she switched her dedication to the elderly working for a home for the elderly run by another church, few years ago.

8.2.5.2 Analysis of Danni's Stories about Her Important Possessions: the Relational-led Self-Configuration

As Table 8.7 shows, Danni narrated five stories about her important possessions that reveal her personal and relational dimensions of the self. Apart from two Swatch watches that marked on important rite of passage and reflect her personal dimension of the self, i.e. her achievement of receiving her first salary, all the other important possessions in Danni's stories were related to her relational dimension of the self, i.e. her husband (a lover set of watches), her family (her family portrait) and her father (a gift of a Seiko watch for her father and a graduation photo with her father). Danni's self mainly revolves around her family, i.e. her father and her husband. There was no possession story associated with the collective dimension of her self. Danni's pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration.

In terms of her self-possession boundary, Danni regarded some photos and objects that she had bought for herself (self-gift) (e.g. Swatch watches) and together with her husband (e.g. a lover set of watches) as among her important possessions. In addition, Danni considers a gift of a Seiko watch that she had bought for and *given* to her father as one of her important possessions (her *extended possession*) suggesting Danni might have a broader view of the construction of self-possession boundaries. Table 8.7 summarizes Danni's stories about her important possessions that are linked to the possession themes and the trichotomization of the self.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Danni's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Personal history	Swatch watches
		A graduation photo with his father's smile
	Achievement	Swatch watches
Relational Self	Enhancing and strengthening relationship with her husband	A lover set of watches
	Affirming familial relationship with her father	1) A gift of a Seiko watch for her father
		2) A graduation photo with his father's smile
	Memories of the past with specific person(s)	1) A gift of a Seiko watch for her father
		2) A graduation photo with his father's smile
		3) A family portrait
Collective Self	-	-

Table 8.7: Danni's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

The first possession story is about two Swatch watches that she bought when she received her first salary. That was the first time she felt that she earned her first salary by herself with "*a sense of satisfaction*". In order to mark her rite of passage that she was an adult earning her first salary, Danni rewarded herself for her personal accomplishments by self-gifting herself two watches (Mick and Demoss 1990a *"Being an adult"* means that Danni now entered another stage of life including having more responsibility to spend money wisely.

> *Danni: "Swatch... I bought Swatch when I got my salary for the first time. It was memorable coz it was the first time I received money I earned it myself... a sense of satisfaction. The feeling was quite interesting coz I felt happy but at the same time I realized it was not easy to earn money. Now I have the money and what I am going to do in this month with this money. I have to make sure that I spend the money wisely. Am I going to spend them all? I need to give some to mum and maybe I should save a little bit? So many questions come after I got the salary. I guess it is another stage of being an adult... planning and worrying too much...I wanted to buy something to reward myself with my own money... I deserved it... so I went to buy something.... Swatch was quite a big hit at that time. Also because of Peter... I bought 2 watches at the same time. Both of them were Swatch."*

Danni continued narrating her second story about a lover set of watches that she had bought with her husband when they were travelling in Singapore. These watches carry symbolic

associations of connectedness and togetherness with her husband. They normally wear these watches in public (e.g. a wedding banquet) as a signal to the others that they are united, an element of continuity, affiliation and love. Through the interactions of wearing them in public, displaying them and receiving praise and comments from others, they are in the process of creating different layers of meanings for their lover watches (Richin 1994b). These watches have taken on "patina" (McCracken 1991) gradually.

> Danni: "We (Peter and Danni) bought a pair of lover watches in Singapore. It wasn't our first lover watch set. The first set we bought them long time ago. We didn't use them... they are ugly. Maybe we thought they were nice. But we don't like them now. The (watch) set in Singapore we chose and bought together. We wear them when we go to a wedding banquet. The style is quite simple... square shape."

Danni's third important possession is the gift of a Seiko watch for her father. Although this gift does not belong to Danni, she still considers it as one of her important possessions (her *extended possession*). Danni bought a watch for her father because Danni noticed that his old watch did not function properly. This watch is viewed as an affirming empathetic gift (Ruth et al. 1999) and Danni acted as a provider and had the "ability to see inside the recipient and to know just what he needs the most" (p. 390). The interesting part in this story is that both the father and the daughter did not express explicitly what they wanted from one another. On the one hand, Danni seldom talks to her father, an authority figure in the family but she wanted to show her care for her father. On the other hand, her father did not tell her what he needed and wanted. Communication between them was implicit. Giving a gift to her father was a way to express her care. Danni exercised her filial piety through gift-giving to her father as a sign of her respect and care (Yau et al. 1999). Danni noticed that her father was pleased and continued to wear it. That was sufficient for Danni to be happy because she wanted to please her father and to be accepted by him.

> Danni: "Then I bought a watch... Seiko to my dad last year coz the one he was using was not working properly. The old watch he has been wearing for years... no point to

repair it. He didn't ask me to buy one for him. But I thought why not. He was really happy when he got the present and continued wearing it.

Important possessions evoke people's webs of personal memories (Belk 1991). Danni continued by narrating her fourth and fifth possession stories about two photos. Danni has two family photos that are very dear to her. The first one is a worn-out family portrait taken in a studio before she was born. The family did not take any family photos after Danni was born. It is the only family photo that the family has. Unfortunately, the eldest brother died at 20 years of age and the family never had a chance to take another family photo. This photo symbolizes the importance of her family in her heart. It also reminds her of her childhood of being loved and cared by her brothers, sister and parents. Although her eldest brother is no longer here, Danni wanted to capture those feelings and moments by keeping the photo.

> *Danni: "Two touching photos... the first one is a photo of my whole family without me. I was not born yet. They took it. They didn't take any family photo afterwards. My brother died... we didn't have any more family photo. I kept it secretly when my mum was going through my brother's items (after his death). She wanted to throw everything away. She didn't want to keep anything. I guess she was quite superstitions at that time... she was not a Christian yet. I stole the photo from her and she didn't notice. The photo was quite worn out. Peter took it [the photo] to a photo shop to "rebuild" (retouch) it and gave it to me on my birthday."*

Another photo marked her achievement in completing her undergraduate studies and reminded her of how she had won her father's approval. Growing up in a traditional Chinese family means sons are regularly preferred over girls, Danni's father objected to the idea that she should further her studies after completing her GCSEs. It was the first time Danni was in conflict with her father. She was in a dilemma between being disobedient and independent (i.e. pursuing her dream), and being obedient and filial piety (i.e. listening to her father's advice). In the end, Danni chose her own way and was the only one in the family who received a higher education.

Danni narrated this story with the emphasis at the end that *"that photo is very special coz my parents smile."* She felt proud not because she made a decision to pursue her studies. but because of her fathers move from disapproval to approval. Danni was proud because of her father's recognition of her achievement, shown with a smile in the photo. For her, being obedient is one of the filial piety virtues, i.e. of the five cardinal relationships defined by Confucius. In this narrative discourse, she repeatedly used the verb *"smile"* when narrating the story. Making her parents happy with a smile seems one of her achievements even more important than her other personal achievements. Danni values this photo so much that she carries it whenever she goes.

> *Danni: "The other one is the photo I have in my wallet. The photo was taken on my graduation day with my parents. My dad would not smile for me. I still think he loves my brother more than me. In that photo, he was happy with a smile. In the beginning, he was the one against the idea to further my studies. I am the only person in the family that has worn a "square hat" [(meaning higher education graduates]. That photo is very special coz my parents smile."*

To summarize, Danni constructed her sense of self mainly through her relationships with her father and husband. Her relational dimension of the self is dominant in her narratives. Apart from her possession stories that are linked to her father and husband revealing her relational dimension of the self, Danni has a story about Swatch watches that marked her achievement in the past when receiving her first salary and reflected her personal dimension of the self.

In terms of her self-possession boundary, Danni's important possessions included gifts that she had bought for herself, (self-gifts), other objects (e.g. photos) and a gift that she had bought for and *given* to her father, i.e. the *extended possessions* (as marked * in Figure 8.5).

Meaningful relationships with her husband, her father and her other family members resulted in including them in Danni's self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). As Figure 8.5 shows, Danni's personal self is largely obscured by incorporating her father, her husband and her

family within her self. There was no story about the collective dimension of her self resulting in no elements of the collective in Danni's personal self. Her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration.
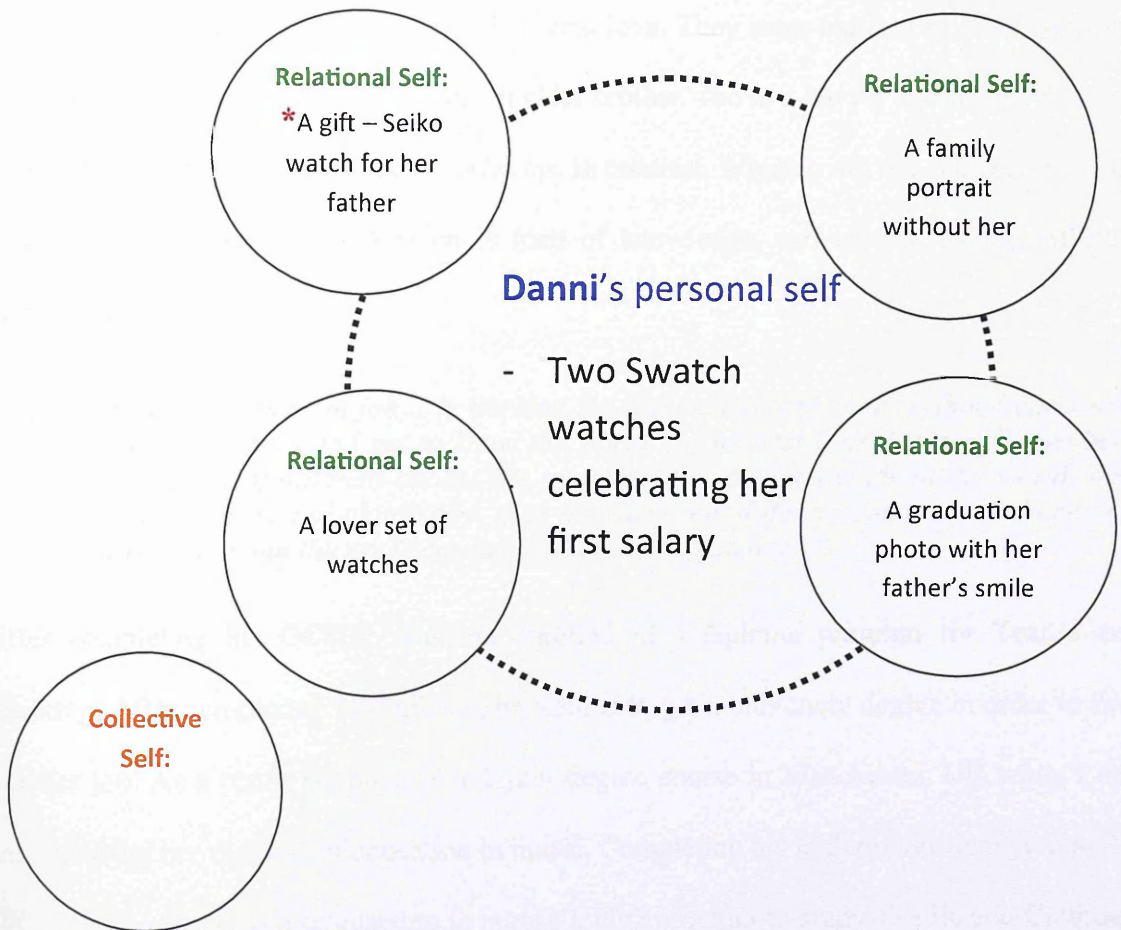
Figure 8.5: Danni's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

*= Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their possessions

8.2.6 Informant 16: Winston

8.2.6.1 Winston's Life Narrative

Winston is a 35-year-old custom officer who has been working for the government for more than six years. He met his wife, Lucy, in church 20 years ago when both of them attended the same fellowship for youngsters. It was their first love. They were married in 1999. Winston grew up in a public housing estate with an elder brother who is a lawyer and his parents. His brother was always good at academic subjects. In contrast, Winston did not achieve any good grades in school. However, Winston is fond of knowledge, and enjoys reading different books in different areas.

> Winston: "My dream job... is working for National Geographic so that I can travel around the world and get to know the world. In the past 6 or 7 years, I have been reading lots of different books, like travelling books to know about the world, then literatures, arts and philosophy, then the earth and different country to enhance my knowledge about the world coz the world is so "attractive"."

After completing his GCSEs, Winston enrolled in a diploma program for Textile and Clothing. After completing his diploma, he wanted to get a university degree in order to find a better job. As a result, he pursued a 2-year degree course in Manchester, UK while Lucy was pursuing her diploma of education in music. Completing his undergraduate degree in the UK, Winston received a scholarship to pursue a PhD program to study Textile and Clothing. He was a PhD candidate and a research assistant for the program of Textile and Clothing for three years. However, after the completion of the PhD program, Winston did not want to pursue his career in academia. Instead, he wanted to work for the government as a civil servant in order to earn a higher and stable income. For Winston, he works for money, but not for his enjoyment.

> Winston: "...PhD (program)... wasn't searching for knowledge, it was just another job for me. I got the salary to do it. The current job (a government custom officer)... not very happy with it but it's a good job... for living."

8.2.6.2 Analysis of Winston's Stories about His Important Possessions: the Relationally-led Self-Configuration

As Table 8.8 shows, Winston's five stories about his important possessions revealed his personal and relational dimensions of the self. Apart from a story about his childhood toys that reflected his personal dimension of the self as an eager learner, all the other four stories about his important possessions (a birthday watch, "everlasting love" watches, a gift of a teddy bear for Lucy and a wedding watch) are linked to his wife, Lucy revealing his relational dimension of the self. These four stories line up in sequence as a love story of their relationship, from the beginning of their dating stage (a watch as a birthday gift from Lucy) to the time they were separated due to Winston's studies in Manchester, UK "*it was the first time we were apart*" (a teddy bear to Lucy). In addition, a lover set of "everlasting love" watches that Winston and Lucy bought while they were dating and a Casio blue angel watch that he received from Lucy on their wedding day mark the important rite of passage. There was no story relating to his collective dimension of the self. Winston defines himself mainly based on his relationship with his wife. His pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration. Table 8.8 summarizes Winston's stories about his important possessions that are linked to the possession themes and the trichotomization of the self.

In terms of self-possession boundary, Winston regarded objects that he no longer has (e.g. his childhood toys) and the objects that he bought together with Lucy (e.g. a lover set of "Everlasting love" watches) as his important possessions. In addition Winston not only considers gifts (e.g. a birthday watch and a wedding watch) that he received from Lucy but also the gift of a teddy bear that Winston has bought for and *given* to Lucy as his important

possessions (i.e. his *extended possession*) suggesting Winston has a broader view of the construction of his sense of self and possessions.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Winston's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Personal history	Toys from his childhood
	Self-expression (creativity)	Toys from his childhood
Relational Self	Enhancing and strengthening relationship with Lucy	1) A birthday gift of a watch received from Lucy
		2) "Everlasting love" watches
		3) A gift of a teddy bear for Lucy
		4) A wedding gift of a Casio watch from Lucy
	Memories of the past with Lucy	1) A birthday gift of a watch received from Lucy
		2) "Everlasting love" watches
		3) A gift of a teddy bear for Lucy
		4) A wedding gift of a Casio watch from Lucy
Collective Self	-	-

Table 8.8: Winston's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Winston's first story about his important possession, a watch as a birthday gift from a then-girlfriend and now-wife, Lucy, marked the beginning of their dating relationship and reflected his relational dimension of the self. The gift-giving was part of a ritual, i.e. a birthday gift (Sherry 1983). Even though Lucy was a student on a limited budget *"It was kind of special coz we were just students... didn't have that much money... so we celebrated in the park instead"*, she carefully planned and chose the place *"in a park"* to present her gift (a non-branded watch, a cake and a card) to Winston. This gift served a strengthening relational effect in this early dating stage signifying their eagerness to be together (Ruth et al. 1999). They were at the stage of enhancing, strengthening and cultivating their relationship at that time. Winston has worn the watch *"for a long time"* and cherished this watch very much because it marked a special stage of their relationship in the past and yet still carried

significant meanings in the present. This watch evokes richly textured webs of his personal memories and his relationship with Lucy (Belk 1991a).

> *Winston: "The first one is... there is no brand... at around HKD 100 (£7) something... more than 10 years ago... when we just started dating for a few years. I bought it for Lucy. No... no... I got it from Lucy. There is some special about the front case. You can turn it. It was my birthday. I got it from her in a park in Kwun Tong. It was kind of special coz we were just students... didn't have that much money... so we celebrated in the park instead. That was nice. She gave me this watch together with a cake and a card. It (the watch) works still. I have been wearing it for a long time."*

Winston's second story about his important possession (a gift of a teddy bear for Lucy) marks another stage of their relationship linking to his relational dimension of the self. *"It was the first time we were apart"* Winston wanted to cultivate and strengthen the relationship with her with extra effort (e.g. expensive long distance phone calls, writing love letters and giving gifts to Lucy). Interestingly, this teddy bear does not belong to Winston. However, Winston valued it so much that he regarded as one of his important possessions. It is the agapic love (Belk and Coon 1993) that Winston was willing to sacrifice his time, money and effort by calling Lucy on a regular basis, sending small presents and cards, and flying back to Hong Kong to visit her during term breaks. Wanting to please and show his affection to Lucy, Winston secretly bought a huge teddy bear, Lucy's favourite soft toy, and carefully chose a special moment to present it to her in order to make her *"surprised and happy"* (Sherry 1983). Although this teddy bear did not belong to Winston, he had developed a sense of ownership towards this gift through investing his time, money or effort in giving Lucy the gift of teddy bear (Pierce et al. 2003). People sometimes have similar descriptions of their "love" of items and their "love" of their romantic partner (Ahuvia 1993). Winston and Lucy had gradually built up their history together through their possessions (Olsen 1985).

> *Winston: "The teddy bear I bought in England for Lucy when I was studying there. You know... there are lots of different kinds of teddy bear in England. Lucy is always so dependent on me. When I told her I am going to study in England, she burst into tears coz she didn't know what to do if I am not around. I was worried too... coz it*

was the first time we were apart. I didn't know how it would turn out but I knew I had to go coz I wanted to get a university degree. We wrote to each other often during the two-year separation... long distance calls were expensive but we called from time to time... you got to do lots of things to keep your relationship going. I went to Hong Kong during holidays and term breaks. Same as Lucy. One time, I secretly bought it (the teddy bear) for her. It was a huge bear. When I arrived in Hong Kong, she was there at the airport waiting for me. I came out from the gate and gave her the huge teddy. She was surprised and happy... She loves teddy bears and she collects them... It (the teddy bear) cost more in HK... HKD 800 (£53)."

Winston's third story about his important possession, a lover set of "everlasting love" watches revealed a different stage in their relationship and revealed his relational dimension of the self. Their consumption and gift-giving patterns have changed as they have entered into a more established relationship. In the past, they used to plan carefully what to buy and when to give gifts to each other in order to surprise one another at the beginning of their relationship. As the relationship has become more established, they tended to be more open and spontaneous about their consumption as a couple. They purchased this joint gift of Titus "Everlasting Love" series watch set together as a relationship announcement "...through the mutual possession of gifts in kind, lovers communicate to the outer world about their relationship. Here, gifts are used to convey public meanings and are beneficial to a relationship" (Huang and Yu 2000: 182). This lover set of watches not only has the culturally shared symbolic meanings as one of the popular watches at that time in Hong Kong, but also consists of their special idiosyncratic and shared symbolic meanings to indicate their stable and close relationship (Montgomery 1988, Ruth et al. 1999).

Winston: "The third one (the lover watch set) is the one we bought together.... Titus "Everlasting Love" series watch set. It was a big hit in Hong Kong in the 90s. All lovers had a pair. Do you remember the advert commercial... it was Anita Mui with a male model kissing and saying goodbye at the railway station. It was like a hot item you got to give it to your girlfriend or boyfriend. Lucy liked it (the TV commercial) very much coz it was very touching and romantic. So we just went to a store one day to buy them. Comparatively, I guess it is more important for her to wear them coz she liked that some sort of symbolic meaning of the watch... everlasting love. At that time, we wore them together when going to church. I think it was interesting to see how a TV commercial can influence people's emotion."

Winston's fourth possession story was about his wedding gift of a Casio Blue Angel watch that he received from Lucy and marks one of his important relationship stages of his life, from a dating stage to a marital stage and reflects his relational dimension of the self. Apart from the wedding rings, both of them wanted to make the day memorable by buying each other something special *"I had a big bunch of flowers to her on that day apart from her wedding bouquet... Then she gave me the watch."* This watch signified their history in the past, symbolizes their commitment at present, and projects a promising future together as a married couple (Kleine and Baker 2004). Apart from the wedding ring, the watch is a special possession that Winston wears as a symbol of being a married man and his commitment to the relationship. In addition, the watch not only has symbolic and emotional meanings of their love, but also has an instrumental reference of functionality (e.g. different time zones, analogue and digital clocks)

> *Winston: "The next one is a Blue Angel series from Casio... at around HKD 1,800(£120). Lucy bought it for me on our wedding day... lots of things to do on that day...I was quite nervous... we went to the hotel room early in the morning. I had a big bunch of flowers to her on that day apart from her wedding bouquet. I guess I wanted to make her happy. Then she gave me the watch. We both love wearing different watches for different functions. I guess she wanted to buy something for me so that I can remember the special day. It (the watch) is a multi-function watch for pilots... stainless steel. It shows different time in different time zones... timer. It has the analogy and digital functions."*

The final possession story about Winston's toys from his childhood linked to his personal history as a curious young boy and his self-expression of creativity and reveals his personal dimension of the self. These childhood toys link to his personal self that he is interested in knowledge and wants to know more about the world. At the same time, the story of his childhood toys leads to his desired/ ideal self that he would like to be a person who works for his dream not for the money. Winston has a conflict between his ideal self to *"work for National Geographic so that I can travel around the world and get to know the world"* and his actual self as a government custom officer who works for the money *"not very happy with*

it but it's a good job… for living". These memoires about his childhood toys contain bittersweet emotion at present (Belk et al. 1989). Winston has not given up his dream of being able to work for something he enjoys. He hopes that one day his dream will come true.

> Winston: *"… a toy tank that I got when I was a little boy. My mum bought it to me. It was nice big tank and I always tried to dismantle the wheels. I have one more watch when I was little that I always played with. What I did was to dismantle the watch, broke it into parts and assembled it back together. I had a dream of being a scientist. If I would have known that theory… that you put different parts of the watch in a box and shake it. They will not be assembled as a watch after shaking it. This story is to prove the existence of God. Have you heard about this theory? It is impossible to shake 50 parts of a watch in a box in order to make a watch. It is impossible. This proves that the earth was not created by explosion. This assumption is not valid."*

> Winston: *"I wanted to be a DJ when I was young. Then I wanted to be an actor. I realized I didn't want to be. Finally, I came to a conclusion that I wanted to be someone who is in control of a group… listening to what I say. I thought that would mean that I want to be "stage joker" or a politician. Then I realized that wasn't the one. My dream job… working for National Geographic so that I can travel around the world and get to know the world."*

To summarize, Winston defined his sense of self mainly through his relationship with his wife, Lucy, reflecting his relational dimension of the self. A meaningful relationship with Lucy results in including her in Winston's self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Apart from his possession stories that are linked to Lucy, Winston has a story about his childhood toys that is related to his creativity and his desire to find a job he enjoys and links to his personal dimension of the self. There was no overlapping of the collective self in Winston's personal self as Winston did not have any stories that are related to the collective dimension of the self. His pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration. As Figure 8.6 shows, Winston's personal self is largely overlapped by incorporating Lucy within his self.

In terms of his self-possession boundary, Winston's important possessions included other objects (e.g. his childhood toys) and gifts that he had received from Lucy (e.g. a birthday

watch), that he had bought together with Lucy (e.g. the "ever lasting" lover watches) and that he had bought for and *given* to Lucy (e.g. a teddy bear), i.e. the *extended possessions* (as marked * in Figure 8.6). As Winston's self is largely incorporated with Lucy, Winston also regarded gifts that he had given to Lucy as part of his own possessions.

Relational Self:

A gift from Lucy –

a watch

Relational Self:

A gift from Lucy on their wedding day – a Casio watch

Winston's personal self

- Toys from his childhood

Relational Self:

*A surprise gift for Lucy –

a teddy bear

Relational Self:

A lover set of "everlasting love" watches

Collective Self:
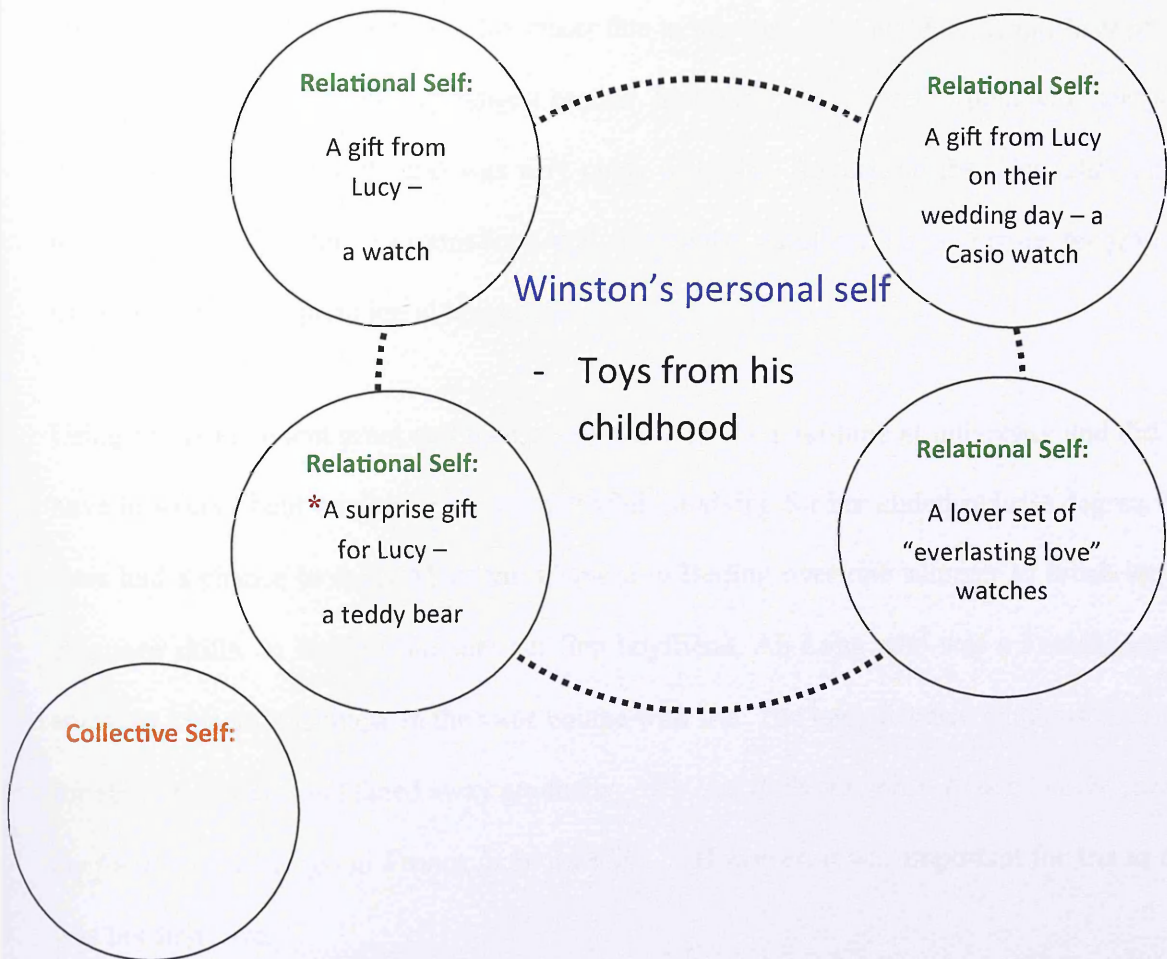
Figure 8.6: Winston's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

*= Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their possessions

8.2.7 Informant 17: Iris

8.2.7.1 Iris's Life Narrative

Iris is a 32-year-old manager of a new cinema in Hong Kong. She is the only child in the family and is currently living with her parents. The family has been on benefits ever since she was a little girl. Her father used to be a drug addict and her mother is a housewife. She did not have a close relationship with her father due to his drug habit and behaviour. Instead, her fatherly figure is her mother's youngest brother. She spent a great deal of time with her *"little uncle"* when she was little and was very close with him. Against all the odds, she studied hard for all the public examinations and succeeded enrolling on a degree program in translation and interpretation at university.

Using the government grant and loan scheme, Iris had a good time at university and did not have to worry about burdening her parents while studying for her undergraduate degree. She even had a chance to study Mandarin Chinese in Beijing over one summer to brush up her language skills. In Beijing, she met her first boyfriend, Ah Long who was a French student studying Mandarin Chinese in the same course with Iris. The long distance relationship lasted for about two years and faded away gradually. *"We had different goals. I have to take care of my family and can't go to France to be with him."* However, it was important for Iris as that was her first love.

After completing her undergraduate degree, she was offered a job as a manager in a cinema and became the breadwinner for the family in order to improve the family's standard of living. Iris is happy that life is getting easier since she started working. However, she has not been in any relationship for a long time and does not have time to invest in any relationship as she has to work most evenings. When she is on her day off, she spends most of the time with her cousin taking him to playgrounds, such Disneyland in order to have fun with him.

8.2.7.2 Analysis of Iris's Stories about Her Important Possessions: the Relational-led Self-Configuration

As Table 8.9 shows, the things Iris regarded as important possessions are linked to her personal and relational dimensions of the self. There was no story linked to her collective dimension of the self. Her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration. Iris has a Citizen watch that marked her achievement in her career and reveals the personal dimension of her self. She also has four other important possessions that are associated with her relational dimension of the self. Iris narrated two stories about her important possessions, a red scarf and an Agfa watch, that symbolised her disconnected relationship with her first boyfriend, Ah Long, who is now married to someone else. The red scarf marked the beginning stage of their relationship when Iris went to France to visit him in order to celebrate their first Christmas in their dating relationship. The Agfa watch related to Iris's subsequent visit France after their break-up. In addition, Iris has a pocket watch that reminds her of a disconnected relationship with her "little uncle" whom she was very close to him. Unfortunately, Iris no longer has any contacts with him due to some family disputes. Furthermore, Iris has regarded some gifts she bought for her cousin at Disneyland as her important possessions "*I love my cousin and treat him like my son*". Although these gifts do not belong to Iris, she considers them as among her important possessions. Table 8.9 summarizes Iris's stories about her important possessions that are linked to the possession themes and the trichotomization of the self.

In terms of self-possession boundary, Iris regarded gifts that she bought for herself (self-gifts) (e.g. a Citizen watch and an Agfa watch) and received from her first boyfriend (a red scarf) and uncle (a pocket watch) as her important possessions. Interestingly, Iris also considers gifts that she had bought for and *given* to her cousin as her own important possessions (her

extended possession) suggesting Iris might have a broader view of the construction of her sense of self and possessions.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Iris's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Personal history	A Citizen watch
	Achievement	A Citizen watch
Relational Self	Enhancing and strengthening relationship with Ah Long	A gift of a red scarf received from her ex-boyfriend
	Affirming relationships with her uncle and cousin	1) A gift of a pocket watch received from her uncle
		2) Some gifts Iris bought for her cousin
	Memories of the past with specific person(s)	1) A gift of a pocket watch received from her uncle
		2) A gift of a red scarf received from her ex-boyfriend
		3) Some gifts Iris bought for her cousin
		4) An Agfa watch
Collective Self	-	-

Table 8.9: Iris's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Iris told her first possession story about a red scarf that she had received as a gift from her first boyfriend, Ah Long, from a past relationship. The red scarf was given to her as a Christmas present in their "first" Christmas together and marked a special moment in their relationship. This gift-giving served a strengthening relational effect at the beginning of their dating stage (Ruth et al. 1999). Unfortunately, the relationship ended with regrets due to the fact that Iris had responsibility to take care of her family in Hong Kong and could not leave her family behind. In the end, she had to make the decision between staying in Hong Kong with her family and going to France to be with Ah Long.

Reluctantly, she chose to stay in Hong Kong to take care of her parents. Although the relationship ended a long time ago, Iris still uses the scarf to remember this special love and to remind herself of her past affiliated relational self as Ah Long's girlfriend. People retell and reinterpret meanings of the past events through the tangible manifestations of possessions

depending on their present conditions (Bih 1992). Although Iris had good memories of the relationship with Ah Long bound up with the red scarf, she had to bring herself back to the present moment and realize that they could not be together by rationalizing or justifying reasons why they were not together, e.g. *"He is quite opinionated" "He smoked. I don't like people who smoke"*. The red scarf contains not only good memories but also bittersweet emotions at the same time (Belk et al. 1989).

> Iris: *"A long red scarf I got from that French guy... a Christmas present... the first one. He gave me 2 shirts and a scarf. We had not started dating at that time. When I was in France on holiday, he gave it to me. I am still using it. Every time I look at it, it reminds me of the good time. We had different goals. I have to take care of my family and can't go to France to be with him. He is quite opinionated. He smoked. I don't like people who smoke."*

In contrast to the first important possession that signified the dating stage of their relationship, Iris's second story about an important possession, an Agfa watch, marks another stage in their disconnected relationship, a reunion after their break-up. This Agfa watch is a self-gift that Iris bought for herself while she was travelling alone in Europe and marked the final closure of their relationship. She has been to France many times and enjoyed *"European relaxing atmosphere"* there. Under the influence of the atmosphere, she bought a watch for herself.

The first and initial layer of her story about this watch was about her pleasant holiday in Europe. As the story developed, the deeper layer and meanings associated with the watch were revealed. This watch not only reminded her of the relaxing time in Europe, but also symbolised her special time with Ah Long during this trip. It was a final farewell to Ah Long *"Totally FULL stop"*, *"It was the last time I met him"*. This self-gift watch is also viewed as "consolation prizes for disappointments or upsets" (Tournier 1966: 8). This watch not only reveals her past affiliated self with Ah Long but also continuously carries new layers of

meaning in it. Every time she looks at the watch, it brings back all the good memories of him. Ah Long still occupies a special place in Iris's heart.

Iris: "The first one I bought from Avenue des Champs – Elysees, France. I have been there many times and like the place. The brand is Agfa. I bought it myself while travelling alone in Europe. It was about HKD 600 (£48). The atmosphere there was so relaxing and comfortable. When you were there, you just got a feeling that you wanted to shop. The price was reasonable. It is just a simple plastic watch. There is a dog image on the front case. It doesn't work any more. I bought it 3 years ago... The story is very complicated. You know, we met at the language course in Beijing one summer. We spent 2 months together in that school. We hanged out everyday after lessons... lasted for about a year or two. That was nice. But it is all over now. He is already married. Totally FULL stop"

Interviewer: "What is his name?"

Iris: "Ah Long (note: a French guy she met in Beijing one summer while both of them studied Mandarin Chinese in the same language school.) I was in London few days then spent 3 days in Paris. I met up with him that time in England. He was working there. It was the last time I met him. I bought a bangle together with the watch. Now when I look at the watch, it stopped at 5:15... I had a good memory of him. Happy or not... it is a good memory."

Iris went on to narrate her third possession story about a pocket watch that is linked to her disconnected relationship with her "little uncle" and reveals the relational dimension of her self. The gift initially was given to Iris as a sign of a close familial relationship. The pocket watch symbolized her "little" uncle's care and their close relationship in the past. Due to the incident of a family dispute over inheriting money, the family split into two groups and neither side has ever talked to each other again. This pocket watch contains contrasting and conflicting symbolic and emotional meanings, i.e. the sweet past memories and the sad present situation due to family disputes. Similar to McAlexander's idea (1991), Iris who was involuntarily disconnected from her close relationship with her "little" uncle tended to hold on to the gift that is related to him as if Iris is still trying to hold on to this past close familial relationship.

Iris: "I got it from my little uncle. It is very small... gold colour... a size of one HK dollar. There are 12 holes on the front cover. I was a form 3 student (aged 15). You know the film called "Go Back Time"... was very popular. I like that movie. The

pocket watch was seen in the movie. He knew I like the watch and bought one for me. I still have it till now... I used to be very close to him. Because of my dad, I was with my little uncle a lot when I was little. We quarrelled because of some inherited money...very complicated...my gonggong (Iris' grandfather from her mother's side) and popo (Iris' grandmother from her mother side) died within a year. They got some money left in the account... not much just HKD 200,000 (£13,000) something. My aunties and uncles started fighting for the money. Some said we should split the money and some said not. My little uncle was in the other group against mum's group."

Iris: "Every time I look at the watch, I feel sad. I don't have any contact with them at all. When their parents died, they should have got closer. No! My mum felt really bad and regretted." (Note: she burst into tears at this point.)

Iris regarded the gifts she had bought for her cousin during the trip to Disneyland as among her important possessions. Physically, these gifts belong to her cousin. However, psychologically Iris considers them as part of her own important possessions. These special possessions reveal her close relationship with her cousin revealing her relational dimension of self. The story about these gifts served an affirming relational effect as maintaining and reproducing familial intimacy (Ruth et al. 1999). Iris is the only child in the family and did not have siblings to play with when she was a little child. Due to the recent dispute with the relatives and the disconnected close relationship with her uncle, Iris felt more lonely than ever. Iris adored her cousin and wanted to spent more time with him, the only one cousin, than ever, *"I love my cousin and treat him like my son"*, *"As long as he loves it, why not?"*, *"I really spoiled him"*, *"I am so kind to him and want to spend the time with him..."*, *"I bought a lot of stuff for him"*. Similar to agapic love (Belk and Coon 1993), Iris invested a great deal of time and money in this relationship and hoped all these good memories would continue in her cousin's mind. Iris cherishes the time to be with him because she knew that some day when he grows bigger and older, he will not need her anymore. Iris is, to a certain extent, reproducing a similar kind of love and care that her "little" uncle gave when she was a child, to her cousin.

Iris: "The fourth one... hmm... some Disney stuff. I took my cousin to HK Disneyland in Sept and bought it for him. I love my cousin and treat him like my son. I promised to take him out that day and asked where he wanted to go. He said Disneyland. So we went. I spent HKD 3, 000 (GBP 200) there. As long as he loves it, why not? I think I really spoiled him. I had a good time there with my cousin. I was thinking I didn't have that much chance to play with him. ....I am so kind to him and want to spend the time with him when he is still a child. I bought lots of stuff for him... the Donald Duck Disney watch. We went to the stores and he chose things he liked. He loves Winnie-the-Pooh... I bought him bibs and cushions. When I ask him "what do you like?", he always says Winnie-the-Pooh."

Iris's final possession story is about a Citizen XC watch that she bought for herself and which reveals the personal dimension of her self. The watch not only symbolized her achievement in the past (Richins 1994b, Dittmar 1992) but is also linked to her personal self at work. Iris only wears this Citizen watch when she goes to work because it matches her managerial image at work. In addition, this watch is a self-gift for Iris, she rewarded herself for her achievement of setting up a new cinema in a new shopping mall. While Iris left UA cinema some time ago and worked for another company at that time, Iris was headhunted and invited to rejoin UA cinema with higher salary to help them open a new cinema in a new shopping mall. She was flattered with the recognition from the company that believed that she had the ability. At that same time, she was under a lot of stress during the process of setting up a new cinema, e.g. losing weight, limited sleep, feeling unhappy and nervous. However, her efforts paid off when the cinema was finally opened. Iris received a one and a half salary bonus. "Relieving stress after an enduring or impinging event and having extra money to indulge oneself" (Mick and Demoss 1990a: 322), Iris decided to reward herself by buying a watch she likes to mark her good memories and to celebrate her achievement in her life.

Iris: "... hmm... the one I am wearing Citizen XC... 5 years already. That was the time I went back to work at UA cinema. It still looks quite new. I only wear watches when I go to work. I don't wear it the whole day. It has a very memorable value coz I got a one and a half salary bonus. I wanted to reward myself that I set up a new cinema. That was really tough... I set up the whole thing from scratch. I did it by myself (noted: with a big smile)... I got to know that they were planning to open a new cinema at City Gate. And the Operation Manager asked me whether I would like to help out."

Iris: "In Nov, I was in charge of the new cinema and got a promotion. It was really tough experience. I lost 15 lbs... never happed to me before. Of course, now the weight bounced back. I slept only few hours during the set up. I was very unhappy and nervous. I did not have the title and the cinema was not yet open. The cinema was open during Chinese New Year and I got the bonus. I thought I should treat myself something... so I bought this watch."

To summarize, Iris constructed her sense of self mainly through her disconnected relationships with her first boyfriend and her uncle, and her existing relationship with her cousin. Her relational dimension of the self is dominant in her narratives. Interestingly, Iris regarded gifts that she bought for her cousin as among her important possessions (her *extended possession*) (as marked * in Figure 8.7) regardless the fact that Iris does not own them. Apart from her possession stories that are linked to significant others, Iris has a story about a Citizen watch that marked her achievement in her career. Meaningful relationships with her ex-boyfriend, her cousin, and her uncle resulted in including them in Iris's self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Her pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the relationally-led self-configuration. As Figure 8.7 shows, Iris's personal self is largely overlapped by incorporating her first boyfriend, her uncle and her cousin within her self.
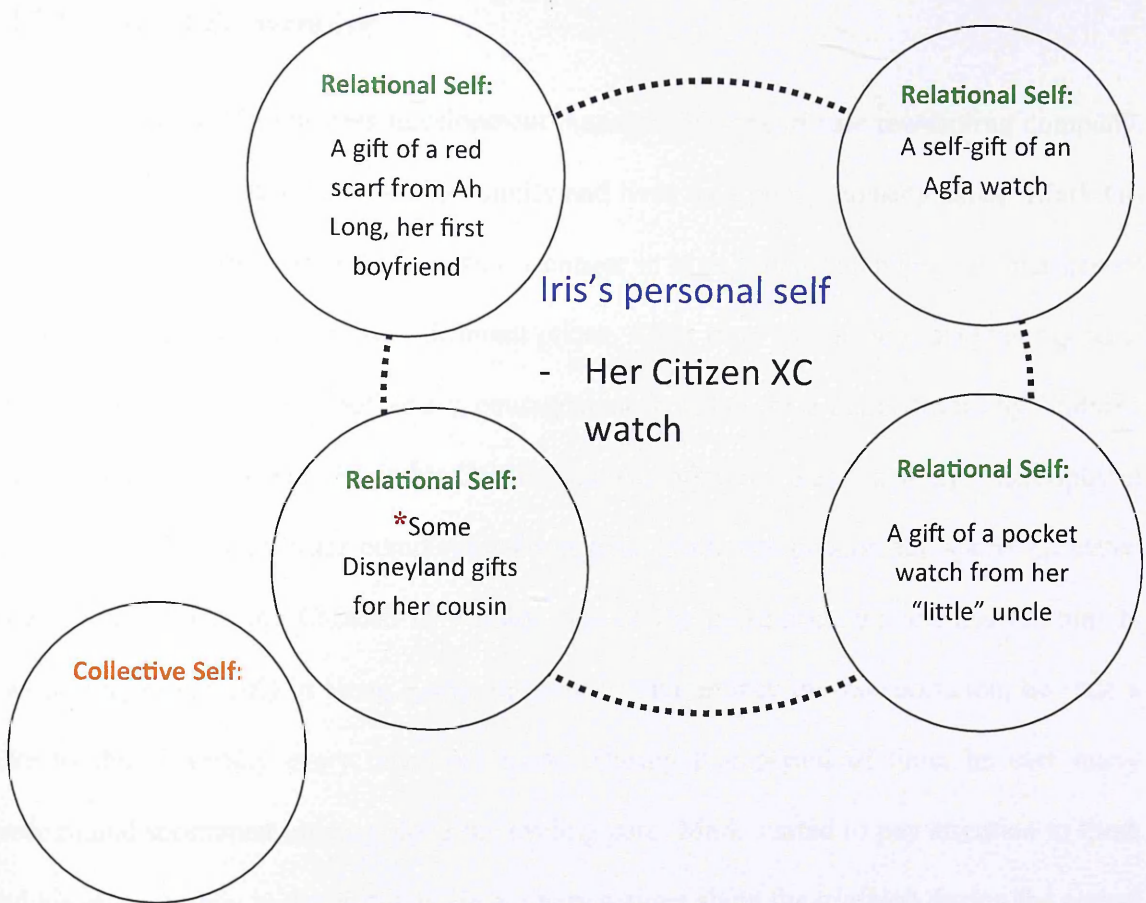
Figure 8.7: Iris's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

*= Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their possessions

8.2.8 Informant 18: Mark

8.2.8.1 Mark's Life Narrative

Mark is a 36-year-old business development manager for a heart rate monitoring company. He is the only child in a working class family and lives on a public housing estate. Mark has been active in sports ever since he was a teenager in high school attending all inter-school running competitions and has won different prizes. Apart from sports, he is also very good at academic work due to his mother's encouragement to strive for a better future by studying hard. He received 1A and 7Bs in his GCSEs and was offered a place to study Philosophy at the Chinese University after completing Form 6 in 1988. His passion for sports escalated when he studied at the Chinese University, one of the prestigious universities (similar to Cambridge, in the UK) in Hong Kong. In order to save money on transportation, he rode a bike to the university every day from home. During that period of time, he saw many professional sportsmen training along the cycling path. Mark started to pay attention to them and his interest grew in the triathlon. He got very serious about the triathlon during the period of 1996 – 2000. In addition, he was the only Chinese person who was recruited to the Hong Kong Triathlon team during that time.

> Mark: "I got some prizes. I got a champion in open group 500 people. I was chosen to represent Hong Kong Triathlon. I was the only Chinese in the group. At that time, all the people [triathlons] had a regular job and did the training in the evening. We were serious about our training and we got good results. Not like this generation,... they bought lots of gears for training and not paying attention to their training. We were more simple... very basic... just a digital watch."

Mark's life revolved around sports. His personal self is defined by his passions for sports. He regarded training as part of his routine in everyday life, just like brushing his teeth. He tries to have a run whenever he has the urge to do so, e.g. *"from 12 midnight till 2 in the morning... then (I) went home to sleep"* or going out for a run for 8 minutes while the fish dish was in a steamer. Sports are part of him and cannot be separated from him. His self-definition is based

on sports, i.e. his achievement in sports, and his identity and significant others whom he met through the sports club. Without sports, his life would be meaningless. Most of his friends are from the sports training grounds or through competitions. He is married to his wife Shauna whom he also met through the triathlon.

In contrast to his lifestyle identity as a sportsman, Mark is a realistic man who knows that he needs to have a stable income in order to support his passion. He faces the conflict of balancing a lifestyle identity as a sportsman and a professional identity as a manager (Ahuvia 2005). He has to have a 9 to 5 job to provide some sort of financial security for himself and the family "*I need money to survive... I need to plan for the future. I can't just do training ignoring living*" and gradually he has put less time in trainings that he loves most. Therefore, Mark's lifestyle conflicts are between his desired past self as a professional triathlon "*the first* [priority] *in my life*", and his present self as a manager selling sports equipment (e.g. heart rate monitors) earning a stable income. In addition, he constructs his possible ideal self as a sportsman in the future "*If I can mange my work and my family better, I would like to take part in some competition. I always hope.*"

Mark: "My passion to sports... I was crazy... almost... the first in my life. I still do some training from time to time... not often... last week I did my training... running from 12 midnight till 2 in the morning... then went home to sleep. I am that kind of person. I woke up at 9 in the morning. I always do exercise in the evening. It is my habit. I just have a fix time to train. It is like part of my life... brushing my teeth... when I have time... and want to go... just do it. Once, I was cooking... steaming something for 8 minutes... I had 8 minutes and I just went out to have a run... ran really fast... then came home to get the food ready. That's how I keep up with my training. Once I couldn't sleep... I went out to have a cycling training from 2 in the morning till 4 in the morning."

Mark: "I can't imagine if I don't have sports in my life... my friends... my wife... Il met them all through triathlon. Training is part of my life. I work and train. I need money to survive... I need to plan for my future. I can't just do training and ignore living. ... I wanted to find a job after my degree to have an easy life and income then do training coz I was worried that I would not be able to find a job."

8.2.8.2 Analysis of Mark's Stories about His Important Possessions: the Personally-led Self-Configuration

Sports play the most significant part in Mark's life. As Table 8.10 shows, almost all of Mark's stories revolve around his enjoyment, passions and achievement in sports revealing the individualistic personal dimension of his self as a sportsman. Mark also had a story that is linked to his ex-girlfriend reflecting his personal and relational dimensions of the self. There was no story related to the collective dimension of his self. Mark defines himself mainly based on his identity as a sportsman. His pattern of trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personally-led self-configuration. Table 8.10 summarizes Mark's stories about his important possessions that are linked to the possession themes and the trichotomization of the self.

In terms of the self-possession boundary, apart from gifts that he had bought for himself as self-gifts, Mark considered the gift of a Rolex watch that he had bought and *given* to his ex-girlfriend as one of his important possessions (i.e. his *extended possession*) suggesting that he has a broader interpretation of self-possession boundaries.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Mark's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Self-expression	1) Timex Ironman that he lost
		2) White Ironman
		3) Old training shirts
	Achievement	Timex Ironman that he lost
	Personal history	1) Timex Ironman
		2) Polar monitor
		3) White Ironman
		4) Old training shirts
	Utilitarian	A Rolex to his ex-girlfriend
	Identity negotiation between his lost personal self and his present personal self	1) Timex Ironman that he lost
		2) White Ironman
Relational Self	Enhancing and strengthening relationship	A gift of a Rolex for his ex-girlfriend
	Memories of the past with his ex-girlfriend	A gift of a Rolex for his ex-girlfriend
Collective Self	-	-

Table 8.10: Mark's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Mark began to tell his first story about his Timex Ironman that he regarded as one of his important possessions because it signified his personal achievement in sports. It was during a triathlon competition in Bali in 2000. This story contains ambivalent emotions as he described the glorious times in his sports life.

Mark started getting serious about the triathlon in 1989 when he studied at the Chinese University and bought his first Timex Ironman for training. This Timex Ironman not only recorded the start of his personal history as a sportsman in different triathlon competitions, but also marked the golden period of his triathlon training, the prime time of his passion for sports. The Ironman Timex have witnessed his personal achievement in triathlons and symbolised his identity as a serious triathlon. *"The name associated with the professional trainers."* This Timex Ironman matched his image as a sports man and has marked the period of his emerging passion for the triathlon and his golden period in his triathlon training from

1989 to 2000 until he lost the watch in a competition in Bali in 2000. Although Mark did not have the watch any more, he still regarded it as one of his most important possessions, revealing his past lost personal self as a passionate sportsman.

> Mark: "The other Timex I bought in 1989... Ironman... I used it until 2000 when I lost the watch in Bali. The watch was quite durable. I used to a lot... training and also competition. I wore it most of the time. Ironman... it was the time I got to know this sport and read lots of magazine... I saw this watch on an ad. Then I saw lots of professional triathlons... in the ad... the size of the watch was huge at that time. I bought it and used it. Especially when we exercise, we tend to use digital watch. We don't use Casio... at that time G-shock was a big hit. Nobody used G-shock for training or competition. The name (of Ironman) associated with the professional trainers. "

Losing his Timex Ironman during the Bali competition was like losing one of the important parts of his personal sports self. After he lost his Timex Ironman in 2000, his participation was on and off in different competitions between 2000 and 2005, gradually drifting away from his passion. The training was not as serious as it used to be. He was often busy working overtime at work at that time. His professional lifestyle as a "salary man" took over his passion as a sportsman. He was constantly in a conflict with these two identities, his desired self of being a sportsman and his actual self as a salaried employee.

Mark continued narrating his second story about his White Timex to explain how he negotiated these two conflicting identities (his identity as a sportsman vs. his identity as a salaried employee) and the symbolic meanings of this watch as his training "buddy". Buying another Timex reminds him of his old training buddy, his first Timex Ironman. "*Every time I look at the watch, I just have an urge to go training.*" Mark wanted to ignite his passion in sports again "... *taking up the habit [hobby] again*" by buying another White Timex to remind of his good old times in triathlon competitions.

> Mark: "Another Timex... I like the while colour so I bought it. It was last summer I bought the white one. Every time I look at the watch, I just have an urge to go training. It suits my competition gears. I don't do training that often. But this watch... is just

the feeling that the item gives to me. It kind of encourages me to take up the habit [hobby] again. I sometimes try to plan a bit... if I don't have much time to train... I would go for triathlon. If I have more time, I would concentrate on cycling coz you need more time to train for a single sport. Triathlon training is more flexible."

Mark was trying to negotiate his desired and actual self on the personal dimension between his ideal self as a triathlon competitions and his actual self as a manager in his narratives. He next narrated his third story about his Polar heart rate monitor as one of his important possessions. Mark had good memories that he was still a poor student when he bought this Polar heart rate monitor. Mark also linked the memories of this Polar heart rate monitor to his present time where he is currently working for the Polar heart rate monitoring company. Mark emphasized how lucky he is to work for a product he loves *"combining his interest and passion to a 9 – 5 job"* i.e. selling heart rate monitors to retailers with his own expertise in triathlon and heart rate training. To a certain extent, he was finally glad that he could combine his passion in sports with a 9 to 5 and a stable income.

> *Mark: "My first Polar watch. The model... the old S-series...When I studied at the Chinese University. I saw people using Polar during training... checking their heart rate. That was the first time I learned the idea of heart rate training and how to improve my training with the heart rate monitor. I was pretty serious with my training. I like the product a lot. Polar wasn't cheap at that time. I saved up a lot to buy it. The old S-series are much better than the new ones... more reliable... not that much problem...It is interesting that I am working for the company now combining my interest and passion in a 9 to 5 job. Going to see my retailers [cycling companies or sports companies] is interesting. They used to be the ones selling me something... gears... cycling stuff. But now I am selling them something... with new the state-of-arts information on heart rate monitors."*

In addition to training watches, Mark also regarded some old worn-out training T-shirts discussed in his fourth story as among his important possessions. These old worn-out training T-shirts are linked to Mark's personal dimension of the self *"the purpose of participating in a competition"*. In the past, his identity as a sportsman was *"more simple"* and *"very basic"*. *"I didn't care in the past... just want to train and win in the competitions. It didn't matter what sort of clothing or gear I had"*. He has kept his old training shirts to remind himself of his

prime time in training and competitions in the past. By narrating this story, he came to a realization that his sports self has changed. In the past, he had more time to train but no money to acquire good training gear. "*In the beginning I wanted to challenge myself... then I wanted to win... a champion... then wanted to get better results... challenge myself.*" But now, he earned more money but has no time to train. To compensate for "*not paying attention to his training*" and to re-emphasize his sports self, he purchased better gear with matching coloured outfits for training.

> Mark: "*Now I want to enjoy the sports... have better gears. I didn't have money in the past to have better gear... now I have this ability to purchase better stuff for training... I even try to match the colour of the gears when going for training. I bought 3 or 4 pairs of puma... I still want to win but at the same time I want to have nicer and better gear.*"

His justification for acquiring better gear is consistent with his earlier comments on this younger generation of triathlon athletes: "*Not like this generation, ... they bought lots of gear for training and not paying attention to their training.*" It is interesting to see that he earlier criticised this generation not only for paying too much attention to state-of-arts gear but also for neglecting the essence of training. In fact, he has become like them in focusing on the gear and neglecting his training.

In addition, Mark's relational dimension of the self was revealed through his gift-giving story about a Rolex that he had given to his ex-girlfriend in a disconnected relationship whom he met at the university (his past relational self). Although this watch did not belong to Mark, he still considered it as one of his important possessions. This implies the significance of this past relationship in his heart. They dated for quite a long time and "*had some good times and memories together*" When they were in love, Mark described how crazy he was to save up some money in order to buy an expensive watch (e.g. a Rolex) for her and to show his love for her. Mark just wanted to please her and to secure her love through gift-giving. This gift at

that time served as having a strengthening and cultivating effect between them (Ruth et al. 1999). However, the relationship did not last and his ex-girlfriend in the end sold the watch at a pawnshop for cash.

> Mark: "She told me that she wanted to have a Rolex... A ROLEX... very very expensive... but I bought her one. I save up for quite some time before buying it. After we broken up, we were still friends. She told me that she resold it to the pawnshop. She wanted to buy one. So I bought it for her. Then I realized that you can enjoy something you like and wear it. After a while, you can resell it. If I had money again, I would buy one for myself. It is better than buying something that will be wasted later on."

Although they broke up in the end, Mark worked out that he had learned and realized that Rolex has a good resale value and it is some kind of investment instead of a fashion item. "*I realized that you can enjoy something (Rolex) you like and wear it. After a while, you can resell it. It is better than buying something that will be wasted later on.*" For Mark, Rolex is different. "*It is quite practical. It is not waste of money. There is a value for it.*" The Rolex watch not only has the symbolic meaning of his past relationships with his ex-girlfriend but also carries a functional meaning as an investment object (Dittmar 1991).

> Mark: "I realized that the watch was useful in the way that if I were in a financial trouble, I could resell it at a pawnshop... I could get HKD 10, 000 (£700) something money back. I recently saw my friend having one on his hand. It looks nice. It is not vanity. It is quite practical. It is not waste of money. There is a value for it. You really can resell it. I don't want to buy those middle price range watches. The cost of those watches is just couple of hundreds. They sell them for couple of thousands. Rolex is different."

To summarize, Mark's predominant possession theme in his stories is his passion for sports and his achievement in competitions. In addition, his constant identity negotiations between his desired self as a sportsman and his actual self as a "*salary man*" is dominant in his narratives. Almost all of his stories are linked to the individualistic personal dimension of his self and reveal his prime time and decline in his sports journey. In addition, Mark's gift of a Rolex watch for his past girlfriend implied the importance of his ex-girlfriend in his heart and

reflected his relational dimension of the self. As Figure 8.8 shows, Mark's personal self is slightly overlapped by incorporating his ex-girlfriend within his self. There was no story linked to the collective dimension of the self. As a result, the collective dimension of the self does not overlap with Mark's personal self. His pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personally-led self-configuration.

Mark's personal self

- Timex Ironman
- White Ironman
- Polar heart rate monitor
- Old training shirts

Relational Self:

*A Rolex watch, a gift to his ex-girlfriend

Collective Self:
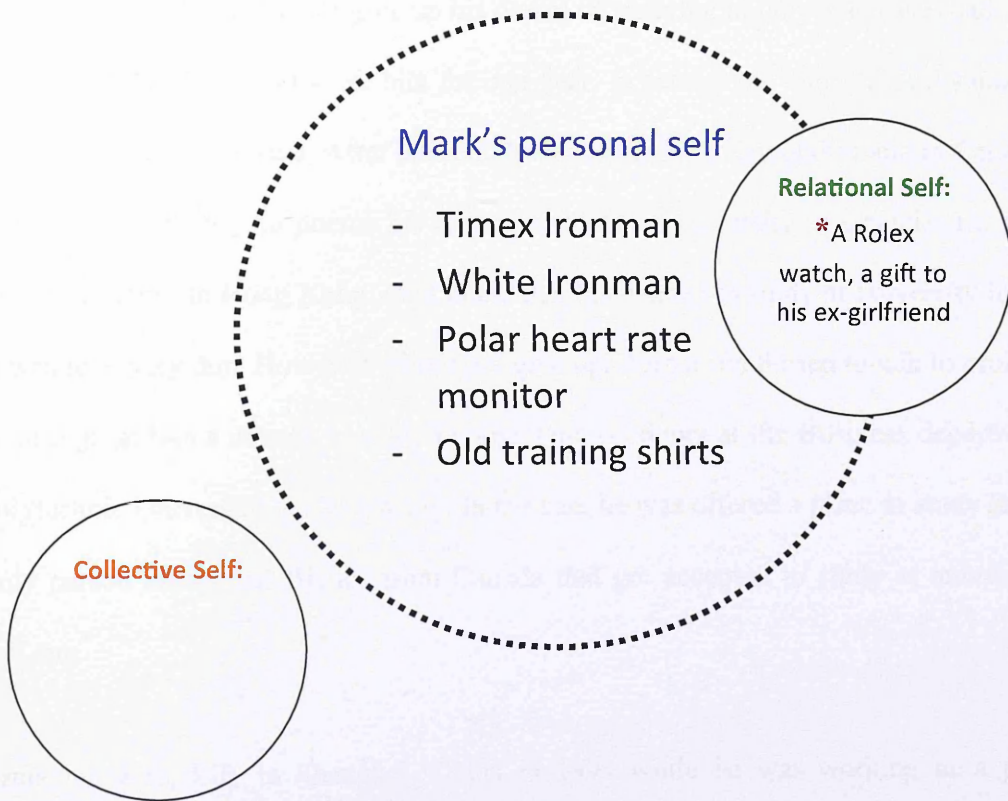
Figure 8.8: Mark's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

*= Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their possessions

8.2.9 Informant 19: Paul

8.2.9.1 Paul's Life Narrative

Paul is a 32-year-old Business Development Manager. Paul grew up on a public housing estate with two younger siblings and his parents. His mother was a housewife and his father was a truck driver. Paul is an ambitious man who believes that he can only improve his quality of life by studying hard and getting a degree from a university. Although he achieved poor results in GCSC, he did not give up his dream of studying at university. He made a deal with his father that he would work him for one year. In return, his father would support his studies in Canada for one year. After his completion of the high school diploma in Canada, he did not have any money to pursue his dream to study at university in Canada. He had no choice but to return to Hong Kong. Paul knew that his chance to study at university in Hong Kong was relatively thin. However, he did not give up. Rather, Paul tried to talk to professors who could grant him a chance to study by knocking on doors at the Business department at the Polytechnic University in Hong Kong. In the end, he was offered a place to study and was the only person among his friends from Canada that got accepted to study at university in Hong Kong.

Paul met his wife, Lily in Shanghai, China in 1995 while he was working as a project manager in a factory for his father. After few years of a long distance relationship, he married her in 2000. Life was not easy when they first married. Paul was working for his friend's company and earned an inadequate and irregular income. In order to save money, they decided to live in Shenzhen, China, next to the Hong Kong boarder, where the living standard is relatively lower than in Hong Kong. During that difficult period, he got himself in debt by taking loans from his credit cards. Paul felt like there was no way out and was stuck in the situation. Being devoted Christians, they prayed to God and believed that God would show

there the way and that Paul would find a better job one day. Paul was employed as a Business Development Manager for a multinational company in Hong Kong. Earning a stable and decent income, Paul was able to clear his debt. In addition, Paul was sponsored by his company to undertake further studies in business.

8.2.9.2 Analysis of Paul's Stories about His Important Possessions: the Personal-Relational-Collective Self-Configuration

Paul's eight stories about his important possessions are linked to his personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self. Paul first narrated five stories that revealed his personal dimension of the self in a temporal sequence. His life story includes a possession of Faye Wong CDs representing his carefree lifestyle and a red Guess jumper signifying his first Atlantic trip to Canada and the US. This refers to his past self as a young, independent and carefree man in the past. Paul also has some possession stories that are linked to a Swatch watch which marked his toughest and loneliest time in Shanghai; and a green Roots jumper that symbolised his past self as a student in Canada. In addition, Paul shared a story about a Polar heart rate monitor that symbolised his present personal self as a Business Development Manager. All these possession stories reveal the personal dimension of his self.

In terms of the relational dimension of his self, Paul narrated two stories about his important possessions, a Casio watch and a wedding ring. Both of them symbolised his affection for his then-girlfriend and now-wife from they were past a dating couple to the present as a married couple. In addition, Paul described his desired future watch (i.e. a Ball watch) that he would like to acquire as one of his important possessions and which would signify his collective dimension of in-group membership (Tse 1996). Paul's pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personal-relational-collective self-configuration. Table 8.11 summarizes Paul's stories about his important possessions that are linked to the possession themes and the trichotomization of the self.

In the light of his self-possession boundary, most of his self-gifts reflect his personal dimension of the self and mark different life stages in his personal history. In addition, Paul considered the gift of a Casio watch that he had bought for and *given* to his then-girlfriend and now-wife to be one of his own important possessions (i.e. his *extended possession*). Although this watch belongs to his wife, Paul still had a sense of psychological ownership towards the watch suggesting that Paul has a broader interpretation of self-possession boundaries.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Paul's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Personal history	1) Faye Wong CDs
		2) A Swatch
		3) A red Guess jumper
		4) A green Roots jumper
	Self-expression	A Polar heart rate monitor
Relational Self	Enhancing and strengthening relationship with Lily	1) A gift of a Casio watch for Lily
		2) His wedding ring
	Memories of the past with Lily	1) A gift of a Casio watch for Lily
		2) His wedding ring
Collective Self	In-group membership	A Ball watch

Table 8.11: Paul's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Paul narrated his first possession story about Faye Wong CDs where represented his carefree lifestyle and linked to his personal dimension of the self. Possessions are tangible objects that help people to store and retrieve a sense of past. Paul narrated his first story about Faye Wong CDs that symbolised his personal history (his past independent carefree self). In his young, independent and carefree life stage he had no financial burdens (Richins 1994b, Dittmar 1991). Paul was a single man with a decent income who enjoyed his carefree lifestyle and consumed the things he wanted.

> Paul: "... that was the moment of my peak time. I had that kind of attitude at that time "Wow, it is only HKD 100 (£7). I buy it." I thought it was cheap. At that time, I didn't plan that much for my future and that was no burden. I collected Wong Faye's

CDs. Now when I look at those CDs, it hurts coz I spent so much money on them. But when I listen to some of them, it reminds me that moment I had."

Paul then narrated his second possession story about a red Guess jumper that signified his first Atlantic trip to Canada and the US and referred to his past self as a young, independent and adventurous past in his personal history linking his personal dimension of the self. It was an eye-opening experience for him since he had never seen any other countries except China before this trip. This jumper not only signifies a special moment in his personal history but also represents a life changing moment because Paul was motivated to study abroad.

Paul: "And the red Guess jumper (he bought from a factory outlet in Seattle with Hoi Ka and Peter)... it reminds me the moment. I am still wearing it. And Xu Zhi An's CD... I listened to that CD on a month holiday in the US and Canada. When I listen to that CD again, it reminds me the moment I had there. I guess we are getting older. I quite enjoy doing this kind of things to think about those moments. It is quite nice."

Paul told his third possession story about a Swatch watch that marked his toughest and loneliest time (his undesired lonely past self) in Shanghai and reflected the personal dimension of his self. Paul's desired self at that time was being a university student. However, achieving poor grades from GCSEs meant that Paul could not further his studies. Paul had no choice but to postpone his dream and work for his father instead outside Hong Kong. Paul considered his time working in Shanghai as one of the toughest and loneliest stages in his life. However, Paul stayed focused and conquered the challenge. When Paul returned to Hong Kong "relieving stress after an enduring or impinging event" (Mick and Demoss 1990a: 322), he bought a simple-style Swatch as a self-gift for himself. Paul still has the watch to remind himself of his personal history of achievement that he fought for his chance to study in Canada.

Paul: "I have another Swatch that had only "12, 3, 6 and 9" on the front case. It is a very simple watch, only HKD 300. After working in China for one year, I bought it. I still have it but don't know where it is now. The reasons why I still have it... when I was in Shanghai, I learnt a lot. I realized I had to further my studies. My life was tough in Shanghai... and whole days at work... no time to rest. The time in Shanghai

was quite tough and sad... no friends. I was the youngest person in the team working for my dad and did not have a chance to go to Hong Kong. I was far away from home and I felt lonely. But I learnt one thing. The reason why I bought it... I didn't have a watch to wear. When I finally came back to Hong Kong, I just want to have everything simple. So I bough a simple watch – "3, 6, 9, 12"."

Paul narrated his fourth possession story about his green Roots jumper that represented the *"worried"* but *"happy"* stage of studying in Canada and reflected his personal dimension of the self. After working in Shanghai for a year for his father, Paul finally fulfilled his dream by pursuing his studies in Canada. With the tight budget, although Paul was quite worried, Paul was motivated and happy because he was one step closer to his dream to get a university degree. His then-future self as a university student was a motivational goal for him at that time to get through his toughest time working in Shanghai (his past undesired self). The green jumper marks his unforgettable and meaningful moments in this particular stage of his life.

Paul: "Studying in Canada...I was quite worried. But I was quite happy. I didn't have that much money to study... I didn't have money so that I didn't get my driving license there. We are only talking about Canadian $400 (£130)...My financial situation in Canada was quite tight. I didn't even have money to rent a movie... I was happy coz I knew I was following my dream, i.e. to finish high school there and have a chance to get a degree."

Paul told his fifth possession story about his Polar heart rate monitor that is linked to his personal history and reveals the personal dimension of his self. The Polar heart rate monitor symbolises his path from his past self as a poor man (the lowest point of his life), to his present self as a Business Development Manager; and projects his future self in order to develop his career further in this company. In other words, the Polar heart rate monitor represents that he had a life transition from the lowest and poorest point of his life *"I had nothing"*, *"no way out"* to a secure and stable living because he now receives a regular salary and can pay back all his debts; and also is able to support his family. In addition, Paul foresaw himself developing his career further in the future as *"I think study sponsorship from Polar is recognition of my job performance"*. Working for Polar was a turning point at

"epiphany" in Paul's life (Denzin 1989). The Polar heart rate monitor not only represents his personal history at his lowest point but also the promising future ahead, and also connects his spiritual self, linking his past and present experience to God.

> Paul: "The latest one... Polar M71ti... I got it free of charge after few days at work. It was a gift from Polar company (Note: new staff of the Sales and Marketing will get a Polar heart rate monitor). The time I received the watch was my lowest point of my life... the worst... the poorest time in my life. My experience was like... I had nothing... until I got this job... providing me a salary. The symbolic meaning of the watch was huge... In fact, I was really poor. There was no way out. The watch... actually has a symbolic meaning that I got an offer from Polar at that moment. And we trusted in God throughout the job searching. It was a very big gift. And the watch symbolized I serve for this company. This is my third year... going on the fourth year now. The watch has quite a big symbolic meaning in it. When looking back, I got a regular salary to pay back my debt I owed people in 2001 and 2002 when I did not have any regular salaries at that time. Hmm... at least now I got a chance to study a course of MSc in Marketing sponsored by Polar... I think study sponsorship from Polar is recognition of my job performance."

In terms of the relational dimension of the self, Paul narrated the sixth and seventh possession stories about the birthday gift of a Casio watch that he had given to Lily, his then-girlfriend and now-wife, and a wedding ring that symbolised his affection and commitment to her from the past as a dating couple into the present as a married couple.

Paul narrated his sixth possession story about the birthday gift of a Casio watch that he had *given* to Lily (i.e. his extended possession) symbolising one of their special moments in their relationship linking his relational dimension of the self. It was at the pre-dating stage that Paul was interested in Lily. Paul invested his money and time and chose "*a relatively expensive*" popular watch as a gift for Lily on her birthday (Sherry 1983). Paul used a tangible object to deliver an intangible important message of love through gift-giving. This gift served to create a strengthening relational effect in this pre-dating stage, and marked their history together in the pre-dating stage of their relationship. Although Paul did not own the

watch, he considered this object to be one of his important possessions (i.e. his *extended possession*).

> *Paul: "I bought a Casio Baby G to my wife. It was in 1994 even before we were dating. It cost HKD 980. It was a relatively expensive watch at that time, especially in China. But... I was single with some good income. We were not dating... got to know her birthday and I bought it. Later, I asked her out and that how our relationship started."*

Paul shared his seventh possession story about his wedding ring that signifies another stage of their relationship from the pre-dating state to the marital stage and reveals the relational dimension of his self. This ring is like a testimony or milestone that marks different life events and transitions in his life. This ring not only has the culturally shared meanings of his marital status, but also includes their special idiosyncratic shared symbolic and emotional meanings, indicating their close relationship (Montgomery 1988). Paul and Lily bought their rings when they were at the poorest stage of their lives. Thus, the rings looked modest with tiny diamonds. Paul did not care for the look of the rings *"I wear this ring for her not for showing off"*. The ring acts as a display item signifying that he is a married man in public. At the same time, the ring has also acted as a *"lucky charm"* to safe guard him and to remind him of being a responsible man to his beloved wife and resisting temptation while travelling alone on business trips in China.

> *Paul: "The rings... we bought it at our poorest time... while we were living in China. This kind of diamond ring... the diamond is so tiny that was so difficult to spot on it. But I insisted on wearing it. My wife said if we had some spare money this month, let's buy new ones. But I didn't have any spare money... we are talking about HKD 1, 000 (£80) a ring for our wedding. Men need to look at their rings from time to time. There are lots of temptations or whatever... When I worked in China... what I mean is sometimes when you are on business trip and alone in the hotel room. You might receive a call to ask whether you would like to have a masseur. It is an item to remind you that you have to be a responsible person. We bought the rings when we are poor. I don't want to throw it away although it is not a nice ring. I wear this ring for her not for showing off. There is no diamond to sparkle... not that kind of function."*

Paul narrated his final possession story about a Ball watch that Paul was planning to buy in the future and was linked to his personal and collective dimensions of self. Consistent with earlier findings that desired objects are regarded as important possessions among informants in China in studies of Eckhardt and Houston (2001) and Bih (1992), Paul told of his desire for the Ball watch that he would like to acquire in the future as one of his important possessions. Paul believed that the Ball watch is congruent with his self-image (Sirgy 1982) *"... a personal statement... to represent myself... matches my status"* on his personal level. On the collective level, Paul wanted to be part of the group among his university friends by wearing the same brand (in-group membership) (Tse 1996).

For Chinese consumers, branded products function as important social instruments which can signify an in-group social identity linked to peers of similar social status; and at the same time can signal increased distance from other groups, to which they do not want to belong (Tse 1996). Symbolically, conspicuous consumption of luxury goods encodes people's social status and reinforces their in-group membership.

> *Paul: "Ball. Actually it is not that expensive. Why do I want that one? I noticed that my university friends are wearing this brand. The cheap one is about HKD 2,000 (£130). Of course, I don't think about it now coz I am working for Polar. But I want to have a personal statement... to wear something to represent myself. That kind of watch I want to wear. I am not rich. If I wear Rolex, people might think it is fake. And I myself feel uncomfortable wearing it. I would wear something that has quite a nice design and the price is around HKD 2,000 (£130)... I rather have something that matches my status."*

To summarize, Paul's important possession stories reveal his different life stages and signify the changes in his self-development (Thompson 1997) reflecting his personal, relational and collective dimensions of the self. Paul narrated stories about different possessions that marked various life stages in his personal history and revealed the personal dimension of his self. Paul also has a desired watch that he would like to acquire in the future signifying his personal and collective dimensions of the self. In addition, Paul narrated two possessions (the

birthday gift of a watch and his wedding ring) that are linked to his relationship with his wife reflecting his relational dimension of the self. As Figure 8.9 shows, Paul's personal self is overlapped by incorporating his wife (the relational dimension) and his university group (the collective dimension) within his self. Paul's pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personal-relational-collective self-configuration.

In terms of self-possession boundary, most of Paul's possessions are self-gifts (e.g. CDs, jumpers and a Swatch watch). In addition, Paul considered a birthday gift of a watch (as marked "*" in Figure 8.9) that he had *given* to his wife as one of his important possessions suggesting Paul has a broader sense of self-possession boundaries. This possession is seen as her *extended possessions*.

Relational Self:
*A Casio watch as a birthday gift to his wife

Paul's Personal Self

- Faye Wong CDs
- A red Guess jumper
- A Swatch watch
- A green Roots jumper
- A Polar heart rate monitors

Relational Self:
His wedding ring

Collective Self:
A Ball watch, his desired object
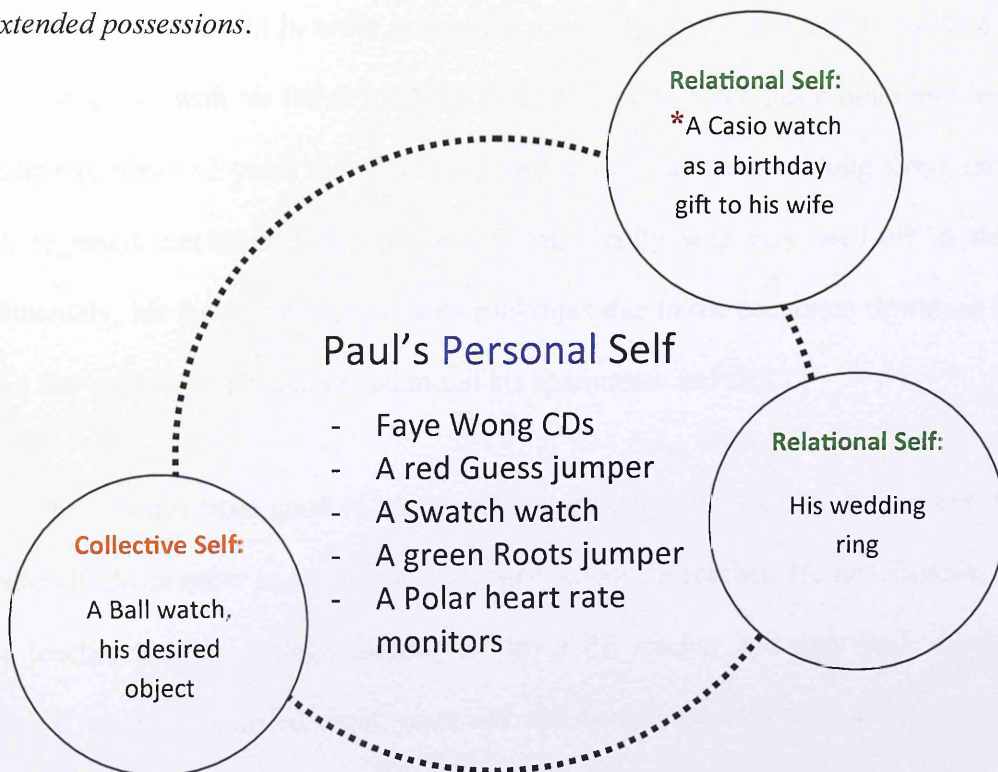
Figure 8.9: Paul's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

*= Informants regarded gifts that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their possessions

8.2.10 Informant 20: Andrew

8.2.10.1 Andrew's Life Narrative

Andrew is a 35-year old theology student who married his wife, Bonnie eight years ago. Prior to his decision to become a theology student, he was a PE and computer secondary school teacher for more than 10 years. Andrew is a dedicated Christian who always helps in his church in terms of spreading the gospel to the elderly living in old peoples' homes or patients in hospitals. Andrew was born into a complex family because his father had two wives (actually a wife and a mistress) which is more typical of pre-war China. He is the mistress' son, meaning that he was not recognised by the family. Although Andrew has a complicated background, he had a happy childhood with his mother and sister. His father came to visit them as often as he could in order to provide a fatherly figure to Andrew. Andrew and his sister went to live with his father's family, consisting of an elder half brother and half sister, when he was about 12 years old. His father used to own factories in Hong Kong and China, which exported electronic parts to the US. His family was very well-off at that time. Unfortunately, his father's company went bankrupts due to the economic downturn in Hong Kong a few years ago. His father had to sell his apartments and cars.

Andrew has always been good at sports. After completing his GCSEs, he decided to study education in PE in order to become a secondary school PE teacher. He met Bonnie, his wife at the teacher training college. Bonnie is also a PE teacher and they both share similar hobbies. They were married eight years old and bought their first house soon after their wedding.

Andrew had a calling/vision that he wanted to study theology and to dedicate himself to God. After serious discussions with Bonnie and attending different Christian retreat camps, he made up his mind to give up his well-paid job as a PE and computer teacher and to enrol

himself into a Christian ministry in order to study theology for three years. Although the financial burden falls on Bonnie's shoulders, she does not complain because this will fulfil Andrew's dream. In fact, Bonnie was very proud of her husband's decision. They decided to sell their first house to get extra cash to support his studies.

8.2.10.2 Analysis of Andrew's Stories about His Important Possessions: the Personal-Relational-Collective Self-Configuration

The things Andrew regarded as important possessions are related to three dimensions of the self. As Table 8.12 shows, Andrew's possession stories reveal his close relationships with his father and wife referring to his affiliated relational dimension of the self, his personal history in his teenage year wanting to be "a grown-up" and to be part of the in-group in secondary school reflecting his personal and collective dimensions of the self. His pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personal-relational-collective self-configuration. In addition, his possession stories capture his identity negotiation process of giving up a well-paid job as a PE teacher in order to become a theology student and these relate to his spiritual self on the personal dimension. In terms of his self-possession boundary, Andrew regarded objects that he had bought for himself as self-gifts and gifts that he received from his father and his wife as his important possessions. Andrew Table 8.12 summarizes Andrew's stories about his important possessions that are linked to the possession themes and the trichotomization of the self.

Trichotomization of the Self	Possession Themes	Stories about Andrew's Important Possessions
Personal Self	Personal history	1) A gift of a watch from his father
		2) A self-gift "Time is money" watch
	Identity negotiation between the past self and the present self	His first house that he no longer had
Relational Self	Enhancing & strengthening relationship with Bonnie	1) His first house that he no longer had
		2) A gift of a watch from his wife
	Affirming familial relationship	1) A gift of a watch from his father

	with his father	2) A licence plate from his father
	Memories of the past with specific person(s)	1) A gift of a watch from his father
		2) A licence plate from his father
		3) A gift of a watch from his wife
Collective Self	In-group membership	Swatch watches

Table 8.12: Andrew's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

Andrew's first story was about the gifts that he had received from his father. He regarded these gifts as among his important possessions. Andrew has a close relationship with his father although his father did not live together with him when he was a child. He respects his father as an entrepreneur who set up his own factories. Andrew believes his father had a reason to do what he did in the past and does not feel any resentment towards him. Andrew received a watch from his father as a sign of reaching adulthood. This watch not only symbolised Andrew's history of reaching a life milestone i.e. being an adult but also signified and affirmed his relationship with his father by "… adding new shared meanings to reproduce their familial intimacy" (Ruth et al. 1999: 392). The watch is an important and memorable possession for Andrew as a sign of recognition from his father.

> PM: Another watch I got is from my dad... can't remember the brand... it got a vintage feel of it. My dad likes watches as well... you know him... he used to own electronic factories... still very interested in all electronic parts. He just gave it to me to wear. He thought I had grown up as an adult and it was time to give me one. Therefore, he passed the watch to me. For me, this is a memorable item. My dad gave it to me."

Andrew told his second story about a licence plate that he received from his father. His father used to own a lot of cars when his businesses were doing very well. However, all the companies closed down, following a financial crisis. Andrew's father sold almost everything he owned in order to pay off his debts. The only thing his father kept for himself and later passed on to Andrew was the licence no. BD 2822. His father bought this licence plate when he started his business. The number "2822" has a meaning in Chinese that "2" sounds like the word "easy" in Chinese and "8" sounds like "rich" in Chinese. The licence plate has two

symbolic meanings for Andrew. First of all, it is a precious item marking his father's success in the past. His father passed this precious item onto him rather like an heirloom. Andrew wants to continue the spirit of the family legacy to the next generation. This gift represented the family's inalienable wealth and carried significant symbolic meanings for Andrew (Curasi et al. 2004).

The second symbolic meaning of the licence plate is a special link between Andrew and his father. Andrew admires his father who is a very traditional Chinese father who does not show much of his emotion through words but through objects that he passed on to his son. His father did not give the licence plate to any of his other children, not even to Peter's older half-brother who would traditionally be regarded as the heir in the family. The recognition and love from his father meant a great deal to Peter. This licence plate not only has the culturally shared meanings of a family legacy item, but also consisted of their special idiosyncratic shared symbolic meanings to indicate their affirmative and close relationship (Montgomery 1988, Ruth et al. 1999).

> *PM: "An item... hmm... a licence no. of BD 2822. Dad passed it on to me. He used to have this licence no. to his car. The number is very special. For me, first the Chinese pronunciation of 2822. Also, he gave it to me. If I could pass it on to the next generation, that would be great. This gives me... a family... it doesn't worth any money... but it is like a family legacy you pass it on to the next generation. It is not the jewel of the family. But it has a special link between me and my dad... keeping it. I hope I could pass it on to the next generation some day."*
>
> *Interviewer: "Are you worried about him?"*
>
> *PM: "I am not worried about him at all. He seldom shows his feelings to me. He is not good at showing it. We don't ask him how he feels. I only ask my brother how he is doing at work. He... I am not that worried about him. He always gives me an impression that he can manage everything by himself. This incident (the bankruptcy) from his point of view, he could manage by himself. When he made up his mind to declare bankruptcy, I am sure he had his own safety plan. That's the reason why I am not worried about him."*

In addition to his close relationship with his father, Andrew narrated his third story about a watch that he received as a gift from his wife, Bonnie. Although these watches were stolen few years ago, Andrew still regarded them as among his important possessions. During the dating stage, Bonnie had bought a lover watch set of Agnes B for Andrew because she wanted to have some proper watches for both of them to wear when attending formal occasions, e.g. Chinese banquets. These watches (stainless steel analogue watches) differentiate his private self as being a loving then-boyfriend and now-husband from his personal self at work as a PE teacher where he wears sporty digital plastic watches. Andrew likes the watch set because it is different from the watches he wore at work as a PE teacher. As he said, *"it is a proper watch"*.

In addition, it is a lover set of watches that they can use to show their commitment to each other as a couple by wearing them together. The watches are symbols of their love. They wear them in public as a signal to other people that they are united, illustrating continuity, affiliation and love. Although these watches were stolen by a burglar who broke into their house more than two years ago, he still regarded these watches as one of his important possessions because they were the first lover set of watches they had had and signified their togetherness and commitment. Possessions are like testimonies or milestones that mark different life events and transitions in people's lives (Richins 1994b, Schouten 1991). These watches in the initial stage demonstrated that their desire to enhance, strengthen and cultivate their relationship (Ruth et al. 1999).

> PM: *"Bonnie bought me a watch, Agnes B lover watches. No...no... no... it was a lover set. It was the first love set watches we had but were stolen last year. We always have sporty watches because of our work... like that kind of digital... Casio... Adidas... Bonnie wanted to buy watches different from sporty watches and we can wear them together in different formal occasions like Chinese banquets. It's a proper watch. I like that watch she had the same and I had the same... quite nice... as a couple."*

In addition, Andrew told his fourth story about Swatch watches that revealed his past collective dimension of the self (in-group membership). During his teenage years in secondary school, Andrew bought quite a few Swatches in order to fit in with his peers. *"I wanted to get recognised from my peers by wearing Swatch"*. It was like a competition among the in-group members that whenever one of the members bought one Swatch, Andrew or the other members would buy another one. For Chinese consumers, branded products function as important social instruments, which can signify an in-group social identity linked to peers of similar social status; and at the same time can signal increased distance from other groups, to which they do not want to belong (Tse 1996).

Swatch was a symbol among Andrew's group: if anyone wanted to be recognised by in-group members, they would need to match their styles and norms of the group. During the time Andrew was a secondary school student, he was in search of his own identity. Swatch was a big hit in the 80s and 90s in Hong Kong. Most of the teenagers owned one of two Swatches or Swatch like watches. Swatches represented his past collective self that he wanted to fit within a group during the time he was a secondary school student and was the means for Andrew to achieve that good.

> *PM: "Also, at that time, Swatch was very popular. The story... or memory... I wanted to get recognised from my peers by wearing Swatch, not just one Swatch... a series of Swatch. When they bought one Swatch, I bought another one. When they bought another one, I would buy more."*

Andrew narrated his fifth story about a "Time is money" watch that he had bought for himself and would be among his important possessions. Andrew remembered the particular personal history of how much he wanted to be a grown-up by purchasing a "Time is money" watch for himself and symbolise his past desired self as a grown-up. Andrew used this watch as a self-gift to express his desired self of being a grown-up. Andrew carefully cultivated this

desire in the past by taking good care of the watch (e.g. taking it to a repair shop) as Belk (1988) noted "a relationship should exist between incorporation of an object into one's extended self and the care and maintenance of the object" (p. 158)

> *PM: There was a watch I bought at Lady Street, called "Time is money". I remembered this one so well because of the theme "Time is money"... how interesting and meaningful...time is so abstract and money is so tangible... you need to cherish time... and I bought it myself. I even took it to a repair shop to fix it once. I was at the middle school at that time. I like the watch very much coz I felt like I was a grown-up when I wore it. I was young at that time and wanted to be a grown-up."*

Moving from the past to the present time, Andrew shared his last story about his first house that he no longer owned and revealed his identity negotiation between his past identity as a PE teacher to his present identity as a theology student. Andrew and Bonnie have just sold their first house to finance Andrew's theology studies. As Andrew is not going to have any income during his studies, the financial burden rests on Bonnie's shoulders. They had to find a way to support their cost of living. They made a difficult decision to sell their first house that they had once thought they would live forever. The house symbolizes two different dimensions of Andrew's selves, i.e. disconnecting his past materialistic self to his present spiritual self as a dedicated Christian on the personal dimension of the self, and his relational self as a loving husband to his wife.

Emotionally it was very hard for Andrew to sell his first dream home. He described in detail how they had built their first home together by choosing the best quality items *"the tiles and the glass"* when decorating their first home and thought that they would *"live there forever"*. Being a dedicated Christian, he believes God has his plan and nothing stays forever. Andrew gradually changed his views on possessions *"nothing is a must for me"* because *"I realized that I would lose anything at any time."* This house signified the loss of his old materialistic

self and the birth of a new spiritual self as a dedicated Christian (Metcalf and Huntington 1991).
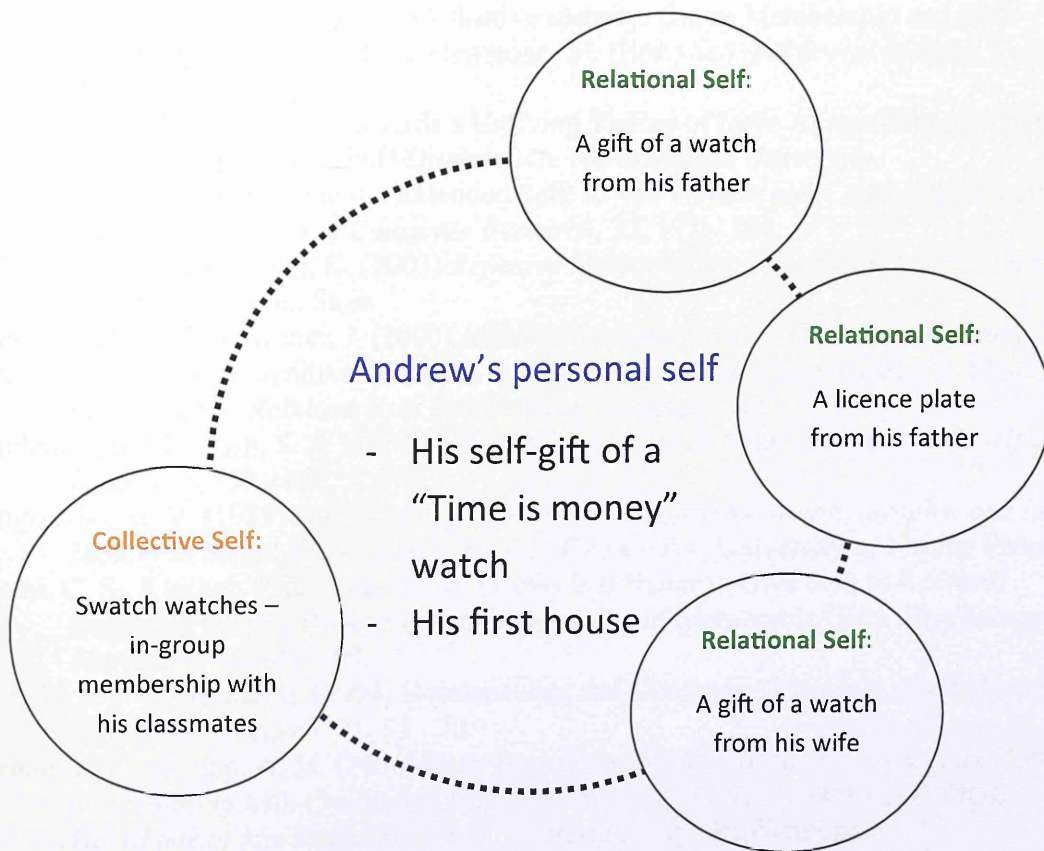
> *PM: It was our first house we bought. We felt that that was OUR house. We chose the colour of the tiles and the glass. Then again... coz we are Christian... when the situation changed, this kind of stuff does not matter any more. I still long for good camera or stylish clothes. But nothing is a must for me. For me, I have changed my views on possessions. I realized that I would lose anything at any time. For example, sometimes you rent a place or buy a place. We just sold our house. When we got the house, we thought we needed to equip the best for it because it is your house. Prepare... equip the best items for the house. After few years, we had to sell it and leave the house that we thought we would stay forever. I learned a lesson... what kind of items you have to keep it forever? Nothing!! I always talked about stuff... like my cars... I drove expensive and cheap cars in the past. Then I realized it is just a car. I have changed in terms of pursuing my passions to possessions... When we moved out from our first house, we thought we didn't want to move coz the house is very nice... nice garden. And then I thought I had to obey God. Then I asked myself what I need? Do I need a garden? Are the materials so important to me? This is how I see it now."*

After his explanation about how he has changed and believed that God has a plan for him and he should obey him, selling their first house made him realize that his family is very important to him. *"The most important thing is that we have to have a family with a good harmony"*. Andrew used to pay too much attention to his possessions, his cars and technological gadgets. This was manifested in his choosing the best he could. Through his experience of selling their first dream house, Andrew realizes that nothing stays the same forever and he appreciated Bonnie's support and unconditional love in the process. Selling the house was to a certain extent a ritual to disconnect him from his unwanted materialistic self and to welcome his new desired spiritual self as a theology student.

> *PM: "A family is very important. It doesn't matter whether you live in a small or big house. The most important thing is that we have to have a family with a good harmony. Are you in good relationship with your loved one? When we moved to this apartment, as long as we are happy as a family. I really have to thanks Bonnie for her unconditional support and patience. The family... that is the most important thing."*

To summarize, Andrew's possession stories revealed his close relationships with his father and wife on the relational dimension of the self, his strong belief in God in terms of how he

has changed from his past materialistic self to his more spiritual self on the personal dimension of the self and his in-group membership on the collective dimension of the self. His pattern of the trichotomization of the self is categorised as the personal-relational-collective self-configuration. As Ahuvia noted (2005), a person's self includes different dimensions of "… group affiliation, specifically individual, family, community and group…" (p. 172). As Figure 8.10 shows, Andrew includes his father, his wife and his in-group affiliation as part of his self (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

Relational Self:

A gift of a watch from his father

Relational Self:

A licence plate from his father

Andrew's personal self

- His self-gift of a "Time is money" watch
- His first house

Collective Self:

Swatch watches – in-group membership with his classmates

Relational Self:

A gift of a watch from his wife

Figure 8.10: Andrew's Stories about Important Possessions under the View of the Trichotomization of the Self

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