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### Consumption narratives of extended possessions and the extended self

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# Consumption narratives of extended possessions and the extended self

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**Abstract** This paper investigates the nature of the boundaries between the extended self and possessions (including potentially extended possessions) in the context of gift giving for Hong Kong Chinese consumers. Our findings showed that informants narrated stories not only about the gifts that they themselves had received as being their important possessions and thus constituting part of their extended self, but they also described objects that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their own possessions. These extended possessions potentially constituted part of their own extended selves. In addition, by the virtue of their material presence, these extended possessions acted as continuous reminders of these extended selves. The extended possessions hence provided the informants with an anchoring point to increase the relatively stability of their relationships with others, thereby countering the labile nature of ever-changing identity narratives. This paper contributes to current debates concerning the relationships between the self, possessions, and gift giving providing a richer explanation and extending previous work on possessions and the extended self.

**Keywords** possessions; self-concept; gift giving; Chinese; narrative analysis

## Introduction

What constitutes the ownership of possessions? Can we draw a fine line to denote a possession boundary between what is mine and what is yours? Possessions and the extended self have received extensive attention in consumer research, as Belk (1988) emphasises that ‘we cannot hope to understand consumer behaviour without gaining some understanding of the meanings that consumers attach to possessions’ (p. 139). Earlier research on possessions has primarily studied the interrelationship of possessions and the extended self (Belk, 1988; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Mehta & Belk, 1991; Noble & Walker, 1997; Tian & Belk, 2005), characteristics

of possessions (Hirschman & LaBarbera, 1990), and the types and meanings of possessions (Bih, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Dittmar, 1989; Eckhardt & Houston, 2001; Furby, 1978; Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995; Piron, 2006; Richins, 1994). However, the boundaries between possessions and the self have so far been under-explored and under-theorised. Rudmin (1994) 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' (p. 492). Belk (1984) and research based on Asian consumers have suggested that there are different cultural interpretations of the concepts of self and possessions amongst Asian consumers compared with Western consumers (Eckhardt & Houston, 2001; Piron, 2006).

The purpose of this article is to address this research gap in our understanding of the boundary and interrelationship of possessions and the self in the context of gift giving using a non-Western context – Hong Kong. We pose two primary research objectives: (1) to examine what constitutes the extended self and possessions in Hong Kong Chinese culture and the emergent notion of extended possessions, and (2) to investigate the nature of the boundaries between the extended self and possessions for Hong Kong Chinese consumers. This paper contributes to current debates concerning the relationships between the self, possessions, and gift giving, and the three-way approach relationship of person–object–person, and thereby provides a richer explanation that extends previous work on possessions and the extended self (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1989; Richins, 1994).

We begin by reviewing the literature on the self, possessions, and gift giving. We then outline the research design, where we used the narrative method to collect stories from informants about their possessions and consumption, and the method of narrative analysis. An interpretive analysis of stories uncovered several themes associated with the nature and meanings of important possessions and these will be presented in the findings. We conclude by discussing the findings; the conceptualisation that captures the interrelationship of the extended self, possessions, and the emergent notion of extended possessions; and the implications for future research.

## **The nature of the Chinese self**

The Chinese sense of self is defined mainly by webs of relationships (Morris, 1994) and is constructed by the connectedness to and interpersonal relationships with significant others, family, and friends (Aaker & Maheswaran, 1997). One of the main influences on Chinese definitions of the self derives from the Confucian rules of the 'five cardinal hierarchies': father–son, husband–wife, elder–young, emperor–subject, and friend–friend (Yau, 1988). There is a certain authority and respect present at each level or in each relationship. Each person has their own role to perform and set of obligations to fulfil according to their position in this Confucian hierarchy. This hierarchy serves to regulate interpersonal relationships in social networks with different levels of closeness. There is a continuum of intimacy relationships in Confucian ethics, from parents who are the closest, through siblings, marital partners, romantic partners, to friends who are the least close. Romantic partners and close friends are also seen as family members with 'pseudo-kinship' relationships (Bedford & Hwang, 2003). Chinese consumers, therefore, tend to place more emphasis on the

interdependent view of the self that focuses on togetherness and embeddedness with significant others or in-groups (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989).

## **Possessions**

Possessions have been viewed as part of the extended self (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992; Karanika & Hogg, 2010) and as the artefacts of the self (Kleine et al., 1995; Solomon, 1988) that help narrate stories of the self and reveal self-developmental identity projects. Consumers reveal different senses of their selves by retelling the stories of their possessions as a reflection of their identities. Consumers often use possessions and consumption goods as symbols to form their identity, to connect with significant others, and to take part in a larger group in a society (Banister & Hogg, 2004; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Hamilton & Hassan, 2010; Solomon, 1988).

According to Schultz, Kleine, and Kernan (1989) and Kleine et al. (1995), possessions involve many aspects of people's self-development tasks, for example affiliation, autonomy, and temporal orientations. Affiliation possessions are related to interpersonal connections with others through the shared meanings of possessions. Autonomous possessions are often associated with consumers' individualistic goals reflecting their unique identity. The temporal features of possessions have similar functions to the temporal functions in narratives. People's selves are revealed through stories about their special possessions that link to self-continuity connecting a person with a desirable past self (e.g. memories), a present self (me now), or a future self (who I am becoming) (Kleine et al., 1995). 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 also predict possible futures (Kleine & Baker, 2004). Selves, identities, and the meaning of possessions are embedded in these discourses in the format and construction of stories (Georgakopoulou, 2002).

## **Gift giving**

Gift receipt is often regarded as part of an individual's extended self (Belk, 1988). One of the key factors of gift giving in Chinese society is binding personal relationships in everyday life (Tynan, Heath, Ennew, Wang, & Sun, 2010; Yang, 1994). Gift giving plays a substantial part in Chinese culture in terms of harmonising and enhancing interpersonal relationships in social systems (Belk & Coon, 1993; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Chinese consumers often use gift giving as a means to establish their webs of relationships and express implicit messages of their appreciation of and affection for their close others (Wang, Piron, & Xuan, 2001). In line with the principle of intimacy in Confucian ethics, Joy (2001) had a similar intimacy continuum in gift relationships from the closest relationship with parents to the least close relationship with acquaintances. In addition, giving luxury goods as gifts is one of the characteristics in Chinese gift giving (Belk, 1996). Luxury goods contain two important symbolic messages in the gift-exchange. First, a message of 'this fine product is appropriate for you' (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998, p. 434) is embedded in the luxury goods for gift recipients. Second, giving luxury gifts brings honour to the gift givers, as they demonstrate their ability to buy such expensive gifts (Yau, Chan, & Lau, 1999).

## Research method: Narrative research design

'People live storied lives' (Creswell, 2005, p. 87). People are natural storytellers, who share their stories with friends and colleagues on a daily basis. One of the advantages of narratives is that they help organise life with a temporal sequence of past, present, and future (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004; Shankar, Elliott, & Goulding, 2001). In this study, informants were asked to share stories about their possessions that were special, meaningful, and important to them. The informants were single, married, or divorced, and aged between 29 and 42 (Table 1). The snowball technique was used to identify 20 informants (10 males, 10 females). It should be noted that it was a middle-class sample with a limited age range, which leaves considerable scope for further research in terms of socio-economic status and age bands. The interviews were conducted in Hong Kong, lasted on average one hour, and took place in natural settings (e.g. homes), which enabled the researcher to develop a detailed understanding of the individual (Creswell, 2003). All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full. In all, we collected 115 stories about informants' important possessions. 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). Informants' personal experience stories often included turning points, significant episodes, or memorable events in their lives.

**Table 1** Demographic information of informants.

No. of informants	Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Marital status
(1)	Andrew	Male	35	Theology student	Married
(2)	Ricky	Male	37	Lecturer	Married
(3)	Sam	Male	31	Doctor	Single
(4)	Jake	Male	39	Accountant	Married
(5)	Peter	Male	38	Engineer	Married
(6)	Richie	Male	34	News reporter	Single
(7)	Luke	Male	32	Business development manager	Married
(8)	Douglas	Male	36	Business development manager	Single
(9)	Eddie	Male	37	Music director	Married
(10)	Winston	Male	35	Custom officer	Married
(11)	Jane	Female	36	Product manager	Single
(12)	Ada	Female	30	Law student	Single
(13)	Katie	Female	34	Social worker	Married
(14)	Ann	Female	42	Matured student	Divorced
(15)	Daisy	Female	35	Behavioural analyst	Married
(16)	Cindy	Female	32	Cinema manager	Single
(17)	Adele	Female	39	Boutique owner	Divorced
(18)	Lucy	Female	35	Music teacher	Married
(19)	Katherine	Female	38	Service officer	Married
(20)	Shirley	Female	34	Flight attendant	Married

Pseudonyms used.

Interviews were not conducted overstrictly, in line with Wagner and Wodak's (2006) method of narrative interviewing. They were only semi-structured and allowed a good amount of latitude. Semi-structured interviews begin with more general (warm-up) questions by inviting informants to share their personal backgrounds and interests followed by related topics about possessions and consumption. Most of the questions in semi-structured interviews were not strictly predefined or preplanned, giving informants flexibility and freedom to share their opinions and experiences. The flow of topics varied depending on each individual's stories. Based on our reading of the literature (e.g. Belk, 1988; Richins, 1994), we used one key guiding prompt, focused on possessions, in these interviews. 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). This prompt was 'Tell me 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, 1994). In order to gain a holistic picture of informants' construction of the self, informants were encouraged to share stories about important possessions that related to their individual-level, group-collective-level, and interpersonal-level relationships with close others. However, we will concentrate on stories about informants' important possessions on the interpersonal level in this paper, as this is the focal point of the paper, in order to understand how individuals view the boundary between possessions and the self (i.e. this possession is mine or this possession is yours).

The transcripts were read a number of times in order to achieve familiarity with the material and to identify some emergent themes inductively (e.g. personal history, achievements, strengthening and cultivating relationships with romantic or marital partners, affirming relationships with family and friends, memories of the past with specific person(s), reconnecting with deceased loved ones through possessions). We concentrated on the interrelationship of possessions and the self in the context of gift giving in order to understand the individuals' views of the boundary between the extended self and possessions (including potentially extended possessions) in the Chinese context. Then, a three-dimensional narrative structural analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) was applied in order to examine how narrators told their stories under the dimension of interaction (i.e. their belief and values on the personal level and interactions with other people on the social level), the dimension of temporality (i.e. how the past event or experience leads to the present self and will possibly influence informants' future decisions), and the dimension of situations (i.e. time and context). We analysed how these narrators told their stories about important possessions that reflected on their different aspects of their selves. We present extracts from different informants' narratives for this paper, which illustrate the central dimensions of how the extended self is constructed in relation to Hong Kong Chinese consumers' understanding of what constitutes a possession or an extended possession.

## Findings

Data analysis yielded a number of themes that revealed how informants interpreted what constituted their important possessions and their extended selves. Our findings showed that informants narrated stories not only about the gifts that they themselves had received as being their important possessions and thus constituting part of their

extended self, but they also described objects that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their own possessions and which they thus saw as constituting part of their own extended selves. Possessions create different layers of symbolic ties to other people. The meanings of informants' important possessions were related to building, modifying, maintaining, and enhancing their existing interpersonal relationships with significant others. The possessions hence had a significant role in specifying the qualitative characteristics of how different actors were bound together. In addition, special possessions were linked to abandoned or lost relationships with past romantic partners and deceased family members, thus representing disconnected and/or discontinued relationships.

In this section, we examine informants' stories about their closest personal relationships along a continuum that moves through intimacy in Confucian ethics from parents to family members, marital/current partners, and finally to friends (Bedford & Hwang, 2003) in relation to two dimensions: (1) gift receipts as part of the informant's important possessions; (2) gifts to close others still regarded as part of the informant's important possessions.

### ***Dimension 1: Gift-receipts as part of the informant's important possessions***

In line with the Western literature (Dittmar, 1991; Richins, 1994; Schultz et al., 1989; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988), Chinese informants 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. Informants often highlighted the importance of familial relationships in constructing who they were and who they are. In Chinese society, parents are regarded as authoritative and respectable figures who give advice or approval to their children in terms of getting a job, pursuing a particular subject at university, or even accepting a marriage proposal. In the following excerpt, Andrew revealed his desire to be recognised and accepted by his father through his story about a personalised car licence plate. Andrew was a mistress's son and was not recognised by the family. Andrew's father is a very traditional Chinese father who does not express much affection through words but rather through objects that he passes on to his children. For Andrew, what was important was that his father did not give the personalised car licence plate to any of his other children, not even to Andrew's older half-brother who is the traditional family heir. The recognition and acceptance from his father meant a great deal to Andrew. This licence plate not only has the culturally shared meanings of a family legacy item, but also represented their special idiosyncratic shared symbolic meanings, affirming their close relationship (Montgomery, 1988; Ruth, Otnes, & Brunel, 1999).

An item . . . hmm . . . a licence number of [ . . . ]. Dad passed it on to me . . . The number is very special. It sounds like 'get rich easily' in Chinese . . . If I could pass it on to the next generation, that would be great. This gives me . . . a family . . . it isn'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. (Andrew, aged 35)

The closest intimacy on the continuum can be linked to family members including siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Informants not only shared stories about possessions that were linked to positive experiences in existing ongoing relationships, but also revealed their negative experiences (i.e. regret, sadness, or pain) about disconnected relationships. For example, Lucy told a story about her piano which she had received from her 'big brother' cousin and which represented her lost relationship due to a family dispute. This piano was contaminated with mixed emotions and memories (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989) that contained conflicting symbolic and emotional meanings, that is, the sweet past memories and the sad present situation due to family disputes.

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. Why did he go? I was angry with a big question mark. I don't know . . . I was too little to understand the dispute. But . . . he was very nice to me and my family . . . He took me to zoos, playgrounds, the movies, 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 . . . I am not angry anymore . . . just sad. I am a music teacher now, partly because of him . . . the piano. (Lucy, aged 35)

Informants' stories about possessions that are linked to their romantic partners signified how their romantic relationships had evolved and strengthened as they moved from dating to marriage. Additional layers of symbolic and emotional meanings were built up through interactions with the possessions (i.e. wearing or using them on different occasions) (Richins 1994). In the following excerpt, Winston's story of his birthday watch from his then-girlfriend and now-wife marked the beginning of his dating relationship. The gift giving served to strengthen the relational effect at this dating stage and sent a message to the gift recipient that 'the giver shares his (her) desire to elevate the relationship to a higher plane' (Ruth et al., 1999, p. 387). Winston has worn the watch 'for a long time' and cherishes this watch very much because it marked a special stage of their relationship. This watch evokes richly textured webs of his personal memories (e.g. wearing this watch when he studied abroad alone in the UK) and his relationship with Lulu (e.g. from dating to being engaged to getting married).

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 and special. She gave me this watch, together with a cake and a card . . . made by herself. It [the watch] works still. I have been wearing it for a long time. (Winston, aged 35)

In the context of abandoned and thus disconnected romantic relationships, the past and present meanings of possessions are often intertwined in informants' narratives. Contrasting meanings (e.g. sweet vs. bitter or loving and kind vs. evil) or ambivalent emotions (e.g. forgiveness vs. hate) are embedded in informants' stories. For example, Adele's story about her Titus watch captured a dialectical tension in her identity negotiation in her liminal phase; that she is in 'a limbo between the past state (i.e. her old desired self as a married woman) to the current one (i.e. her new abandoned self as a divorcee)' (Schouten, 1991). The original meaning of the watch contains 'love forever', whereas the new additional meaning attached to the watch

is abandonment and pain. In Adele's case, she did not want a divorce. In general, people who do 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). Adele held on to the watch in the process of identity reconstruction, and her narrative captures the dialectal tension experienced as a divorcee within her identity role project (Kleine & Kleine, 2000).

When he studied abroad, he bought me a Titus [watch]. It was the first time we were separated [in two countries]. I didn't wanna let him go . . . 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 engraved 'love forever' [in Chinese characters] on the back of the watch . . . [pause] Forget it. It's over. It was the past! [Note: she is divorced now] (Adele, aged 39)

### ***Dimension 2: Gifts to others still regarded as part of the informant's important possessions***

Informants in this study not only regarded gifts they had received as their important possessions, but also gifts that they had given to significant others were still categorised as part of their own important possessions. This extension aspect of important possessions has remained largely unexplored in earlier studies.

Traditionally, children are regarded as important assets that provide security and posterity for when parents reach old age (Shek, 1996), as a Chinese idiom says: *yang er fang lao* meaning raising a son (or daughter) to secure a good life in old age. 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 (Ng, Loong, Liu, & Weatherall, 2000; Yau, 1988). The duty of care (i.e. filial piety) to parents is a reciprocal act from the children as a gesture to thank parents for raising them and giving them 'the ultimate gift – the gift of life' (Joy, 2001, p. 252). According to the findings, pleasing and satisfying parents by buying them expensive luxury goods or providing them with a comfortable life were one of the ways to demonstrate their filial piety. Parents gain face by displaying their conspicuous goods to their friends as evidence that their children care about them. In the following excerpt, Shirley demonstrated her filial piety by paying for the holiday trip to Europe and buying an expensive watch for her mother in one of her possession stories.

I bought a Rolex for my mum when travelling in Switzerland . . . I travelled quite often with her in the past and paid for her trips. We were on a tour in Switzerland visiting a Rolex factory . . . I know she loves Rolex. I bought one for her there. Mum was really happy . . . It is natural. I don't know . . . when I argue with her, after a while, we are okay. I always think about that sometimes when I travel, I see something very nice. Then I think I wish mum were here. That would be nice. It is natural. I have respect for her. (Shirley, aged 34)

Several informants noted that communications with their parents are indirect and implicit. Expressing love and care verbally (e.g. saying I love you or I miss you) or physically (e.g. hugging and kissing) are quite unusual in Chinese parent–children relationship (Wu & Chao, 2005). Instead, they may use tangible support to show their affection and care (e.g. paying the extra tuition fees to support their children's

education or taking them out for a lovely meal). Anticipating and providing for parents' needs is another way for the children to express affection and care. In the following excerpt, Katie described the gift of a Seiko watch that she had given to her father. Katie noticed that his old watch did not function properly, and so she acted as a provider who was able to anticipate what he needed the most. Giving a gift to her father was an explicit and tangible way to show she cared. Although her father did not say anything, Katie noticed that her father has worn it ever since. That was sufficient for Katie to be happy because she wanted to please and care for her father.

Then I bought a watch . . . Seiko for my dad last year coz the one he was using was not working properly. The old watch he had been wearing for years . . . no point in repairing 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. (Katie, aged 34)

Building relationship closeness with extended family members is also identified in the findings. Compared with the image of parents as authoritative and respected figures, aunts and uncles seem to be projected as warm, loving, and kind figures in informants' narratives. For example, Cindy regarded gifts she bought at Disneyland for her nephew as some of her own important possessions. To compensate for her own unhappy childhood when she felt lonely and neglected by her parents, Cindy invested a great deal of time and money cultivating this auntie–nephew relationship and hoped all these warm and happy memories would remain in her nephew's memories. Cindy cherished the time with her nephew because she knew that 'When he gets older, he doesn't want me anymore'.

The fourth one . . . hmm . . . some Disney stuff. I took my nephew to HK Disneyland in September and bought it for him. I love my nephew 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 (US\$385 or GB£250) there . . . 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 . . . I really spoiled him. We went to the stores and he chose things he liked. He loves Winnie the Pooh . . . I bought him bibs and cushions . . . (Cindy, aged 32)

In addition, many informants spoke about possessions (i.e. gifts) that they had given to their romantic/marital partners in the findings. The meanings of these 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. Informants shared their stories of 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 (Belk & Coon, 1993; Mick & Demoss, 1990). They revealed how much they wanted to please and to surprise their romantic partners in their stories of important possessions.

The following excerpt shows meticulous planning by Ricky in terms of how to best surprise his then-girlfriend now-wife, Yvonne, by investing time and money in buying a gift that she would really like. This story of how Ricky tried to mend the worn-out gift (a stuffed toy rabbit) by wrapping it in a plastic bag and displaying it in their bedroom follows Olson's (1985) suggestion that younger married couples build up their history together through their possessions. Over time, the meanings of the stuffed toy rabbit have become idiosyncratic, singular, and irreplaceable

with intertwined layers of meanings as Ricky's present gradually took on 'patina' (McCracken, 1990).

There is a soft toy rabbit dressed in a farmer outfit . . . this big. We had just been dating for few months. One day, we saw this rabbit in a shopping mall. She loved it so much . . . touching it . . . hugging it. But she thought it was too expensive. Then she didn't buy it . . . I went back to the shop afterwards. When she got it, she was really surprised and happy. She really likes this rabbit . . . We still have it. My wife wanted to throw it away, but I insisted she didn't. It is kind of worn-out. I mended it. 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 can. I really don't want to throw it away. (Ricky, aged 37)

Similarly, the following excerpt captures the symbolic and emotional meanings and values of the possession that were intertwined through different interactions and events (Richins, 1994). Apart from the symbolic meaning of the necklace as a baptismal gift that Jake gave to Shirley, there were additional lived experiences associated with this item, an incident of dropping the pendant down the sink, when both Jake and Shirley realise 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, Kostova, & Dirks, 2003, p. 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) from the past and possible meanings in the future.

I gave it [a pendant of a diamond cross] to her on her baptism. It is very memorable. 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, that is, as husband and wife, than a person alone . . . It is a necklace that we had a '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-bend. 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 . . . ' . . . Then we both tried again with all kinds of methods and finally got it out. I used Blu 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, aged 39)

In the context of disconnected relationships, informants shared stories about possessions that represented their past self and evaluated how much they had learned and changed from the disconnected relationship in order to remind themselves of how satisfied (or dissatisfied) they are at present. Although the relationship ended some time ago, the relationship with the object continues. For example, Ann shared her possession story about a watch that she had bought and given to her then-husband, Andy, on their wedding day as an ex-wife to her ex-husband in the past. However, the marriage did not last and ended in divorce soon after. 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 & Huntington, 1991). In Ann's case, she was the one who initiated the divorce, and she was happy to disconnect from her old undesired

self as 'an obedient and dependent woman' to her husband and to welcome her new desired self and to follow her dream to do something she had always longed for (i.e. pursuing her passion for the arts). Looking back, Ann is still pleased with her decision that she has moved on with her life.

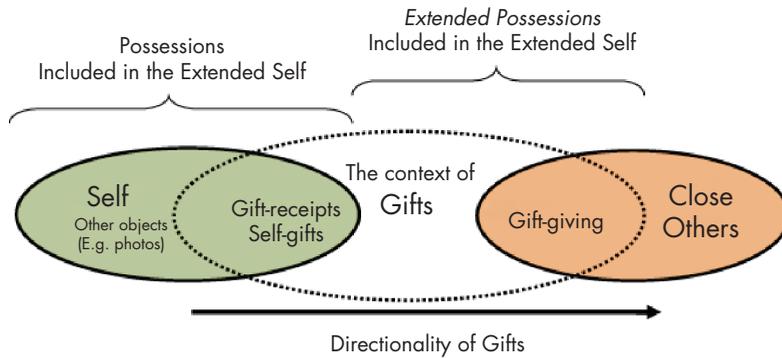
I bought [a watch] for my ex-husband as a wedding gift. Well . . . we chose the rings together. Actually, I designed the rings. I am talking about a secret present. I gave it to him on our wedding night. He was really surprised. But he thought it was too expensive and did not like it . . . not because of robbery . . . it is because he tried to avoid any scratches. He never used it . . . never! It lost the meaning of the watch. In my opinion, it is meaningless if he did not use it . . . Looking back [the divorce] . . . I decided to divorce him . . . he was upset . . . he spent so many years . . . kind of investment on me . . . My mum still nags about it. Forget it . . . never mind. The most important thing is that we were happy when we were apart. (Ann, aged 42)

In addition, the Chinese concept of family could expand to include close friends who are regarded as part of the family. 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. The following excerpt shows Katherine's narratives about her important possessions – a 'Mickey Mouse Forever Friends' watch. Katherine 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 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).

This one [important possession] 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 in contact now . . . I like this watch because it has a special meaning. Also, I like Mickey Mouse. Plus it says 'Forever Friends'. (Katherine, aged 38)

## **General discussion**

The objective of this research was to explore what constituted the extended self, possessions, and the emergent notion of extended possessions and to investigate the nature of the boundaries between the extended self and possessions for Hong Kong Chinese consumers. The findings indicated that the consumers' narratives about important possessions included others' possessions that had once been their own (i.e. gifts they had given) and which they continued to see as a part of their own possession set. Our research findings reveal that the nature of the boundaries between the extended self and possessions for Hong Kong Chinese consumers may have a broader interpretation than those found in Western studies. This could contribute to and enhance the existing literature on possessions and the extended self (Figure 1). Based on the empirical findings, the boundary of gifts as possessions is extended from gift 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.

**Figure 1** Possessions, extended possession, and the extended self.

the extended possessions – this phenomenon has not been identified in any earlier studies).

Based on this understanding, we maintain that the ownership of extended possessions can be viewed in the light of psychological perspectives (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001). Psychological ownership is recognised by individuals who have feelings of ownership over an object. This means that psychological ownership can occur in the absence of factual or legal ownership where individuals do not actually own an object (see Chen, 2009; Etzioni, 1991; Furby, 1980; Peck & Shu, 2009; Wilpert, 1991). The notion of ‘ownership’ can hence be extended to a state of mind if an individual has feelings of ownership towards material or immaterial objects (e.g. ideas or beliefs) (Pierce et al., 2001, 2003; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004). Indeed, it has been suggested by Rudmin (1994) 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’ (p. 501).

The ‘virtual ownership’ of gifts and their significance to social relationships can be further explained based on the qualities of the Chinese culture and self-concept. The boundary of the Chinese self is amorphous enough to include family members and significant others in the self (Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). ‘Father and son are one body; husband and wife, brothers are all one body’ (Confucian Rites cf. Hwang, 1999, p. 169). Our findings indicate that there is a qualitative connection in the way Chinese consumers regard their possessions and the way they regard their sense of self. We hence posit that because the Chinese consumers included close others into their selves, this also allowed them to include others’ possessions that had once been their own (i.e. gifts they had given) as remaining part of the gift giver’s own possession set.

The three-way approach – relationship of person–object–person (P–O–P) – has remained under-theorised in consumer research. Possessions carry cultural and symbolic meanings (Gentry, Baker, & Kraft, 1995; McCracken, 1986) and often are viewed as a means of communication that individuals (self) express (or even create) who they are to others or vice versa (Dittmar, 1992). However, in our observations, possessions in the P–O–P relationships not only had the function of communication but also a power of binding a relationship between individuals (self) and others in a social structure (e.g. parent–child, auntie–nephew, and husband–wife relationships).

By the virtue of their material presence, these extended possessions acted as continuous reminders of their extended selves. The extended possessions hence provided the informants with an anchoring point to increase the relatively stability of their relationships with others countering the labile nature of ever-changing identity narratives.

Here, we can draw on theoretical insights from science and technology studies, where it has been widely recognised that material objects increase stability and permanence in social relationships and related practices (e.g. Latour, 1987). For example, by writing spoken words down, we may extend their stability and permanence over time, such as cooking recipes and religious texts. Similarly, gifts as possessions, and as extended possessions, can have a similar function. This delegation of social strategies into material artefacts (in order to stabilise relationships) has been recognised as one of the defining qualities of human social interactions. For example, unlike humans, baboon societies lack these extra-somatic resources (Callon & Latour, 1981). As a result, to maintain order, a top baboon needs to rely on 'snarling, chest beating, and physical violence . . . these are his weapons of first, but also of last resort' (Law, 2003, p. 4). In contrast, in our context of gift giving, the observed extra-somatic qualities of gifts have the function of materially linking (and influencing the nature of stability in) social relationships. As such, this material linking extends the influence of gifts beyond the immediate context of direct social interaction. In addition, based on our observations, we maintain that this social linking is further increased when gifts remain 'virtual' possessions of the gift giver. This allows the extended self-concept in relation to 'virtual ownership' to acquire material manifestations, increasing permanence and stability in the way people perceive themselves and relate others, in comparison to mere speech and other forms of direct social interaction. Even in the observed abandoned or disconnected relationship, the possessions continue to link these people together. Having said this, however, we recognise that people define and redefine the meaning of their possessions. Thus although possessions may increase the relative stability of relationships, possessions can be given new interpretations as a part of the self-development of identity projects.

Overall, in our observations, the extended Chinese self-concept and social binding of gifts worked together to shape Chinese gift-identity relationships. This can be seen as an important qualitative characteristic of Chinese social interaction. For example, Chinese values emphasise harmony in webs of social relations with significant others. Chinese society is viewed as a relational group based society, that is, one dominated by networks of interpersonal relationships (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Liang, 1963). However, the 'structure of social relations in China rests largely on fluid, person-centred social networks, rather than on fixed social institutions' (Yan, 1996, p. 13). There are hence strong cultural reasons that give 'virtual possessions' a heightened significance in the gift giver and recipient relationship.

In addition, our findings offer new insights into the boundaries around possessions (i.e. what constitutes possessions) which would be worth exploring in other cultures (e.g. how often do Western gift givers check what has happened to their gifts, e.g. has the photo been displayed or the picture hung, has the scarf or broach been worn, is the kitchen implement in use?). This would be an important direction for further research as individuals influenced by their cultural backgrounds use consumption and possessions as symbols to define their sense of self.

Our findings also have important implications for practitioners. To begin with, knowledge about extended possessions and extended self can be directly applied to

consumer marketing, such as product image objectives. For example, we can use this new understanding by positioning a product in the mind of consumer as a tool to facilitate their extended-self aspirations in the Chinese context. In marketing communications, gift giving can be stimulated by showing how a gift continues to be partly a possession of the gift giver. Gifts signify a tangible prompt and cue for bonding between the gift giver and gift receiver. In addition, B2B marketing practitioners can benefit from these new insights from consumer behaviour research by recognising extended possessions as a means to build stronger actor bonds between the managers of different organisations (cf. Hakansson & Johanson, 1992), such as drawing upon the nature of gift giving as a means of connecting to one another (Belk, 1988; Tse, 1996). This is a potentially important insight for managing B2B relationships in this specific cultural context in the face of the challenges of the growing global marketplace in which Western marketing managers need to operate and manage their business relationships with their Chinese counterparts. This has particular importance in Confucian hierarchical societies, where gift-giving behaviour has a heightened importance. Indeed, extended possessions can be seen as one of the fundamental means to tap into a close-knit social network of pseudo-kinship relationships. This is particularly important as the Chinese culture has a clear distinction in terms of treatments and social interactions between insiders (*zijiren*) and outsiders (*wairen*) in Chinese societies. People who are regarded as own people or insiders (*zijiren*) receive different levels of trust and interactions compared with outsiders (*wairen*) in a social network (Joy, 2001; K.S. Yang, 1995).

To sum up, collecting and analysing consumer narratives allowed us to reach for a deeper understanding in terms of how informants interpret the meaning of possessions and how they view themselves through their stories of important objects. These informants shared their innermost feelings about their possessions and signified who they were, how they became who they are, and sometimes also who they want to be in the future. In addition, their stories also revealed a broader notion of the boundaries around (often extended) possessions among consumers from a society like China, which places great importance on the social group, social relationships, and social networks, providing the basis for future research. In future research, it would be interesting to see how these findings hold up at other stages of relationships, such as remarriage, as well as how they differ cross-culturally.

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