The Bamboo Steamer Basket

And the value associated with it during a millennium

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Project Scope

The project is structured around three major points, the bamboo steamer basket itself, the maker and the user. The idea is to investigate on the origins of the object, how it became popular and how it relates to the maker and the user by looking at the historical, cultural, social and economical context. The bamboo steamer is an object of the past and the present. Therefore the objective is to find out how it is associated with value over time.

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Historical and Cultural Context

The bamboo steamer basket seems to have been, and still is, a basic omnipresent commodity, but curiously it is very difficult to find historical information about it. In order to understand more about its appearance and dispersion it is therefore necessary to study the cultural and historical context.

Archeological findings from the Neolithic period 6 to 7000 years ago of cooking pots with colander like inserts indicate that steaming is one of the oldest cooking methods in China. [1]

Steamers were mainly used to cook rice and millet the main components of Chinese cuisine at the time, but it was also used to cook meat and fish, and its use increased even more during the Han period, when the milling of grain lead to the invention of pasta and bread. [2] The origin of dim sum, which is closely associated with the bamboo steamer, can be traced back 2000 years. According to Needham the bamboo steamer appeared somewhere before the Sung dynasty (+960 to +1279). [3] In his encyclopedic work *Science and Civilization in China*, he acknowledges its importance for the durability of steaming over time, but he is not more precise about its origins. This is for one due to a lack of archeological evidence, because of the biodegradability of the material, and also the little attention it received in art and literature due to its modest character. It may therefore help to study the culture of the Sung dynasty.

The Sung period was marked by major changes in both rural and urban life. In connection with the Sung dynasty we come across the terms, agricultural- industrial- and commercial revolution. [4] The discovery of new strains of rice increased the production of this cereal. Its advantages were faster maturity and better resistance to draught. The possibility of double cropping and new rice plantations lead to a growth in population, which at its peak was estimated to be 100 Million. [5]

This surplus of cereal production influenced an increase in urbanization. Hangchow had more than 1 Mio inhabitants by 1275. [6] They had to be fed by a constant supply of food from the rural areas. In *Daily life in China* Historian Jacques Gernet talks about rice barges importing several hundred tons of rice daily to Hangchow from the rice growing regions. [7] The process of urbanization is therefore closely linked to the development of trade and the rise of a new class, “the merchants”. [8] Merchants were traveling and therefore stimulated cultural exchange. They returned home, not only with goods for sale, but also with cultural knowledge from elsewhere. They are greatly responsible for the dispersion of culinary practices, and the development of the Chinese Cuisine, which Historian Michael Freeman describes as an amalgam of several traditions from different regions [9] and I believe that the bamboo steamer is part of it.
Obviously this only explains how the bamboo steamer became popular but not why. This question can be answered with the emergence of a need for a better, lighter, cheaper and easier to produce tool for steaming.

Both Gernet and Freeman are talking about the hustling and bustling street life and a large number of restaurants, teahouses, noodle shops, party services and hawkers a description visualized in the famous painting Spring Festival along the River by Chang Tse-Tuan (Northern Sung). [10] (Figures 1 and 2)

“The intense commercial activity, the extreme density of the population, and the constant influx of visitors explain why there were so many places where inhabitants and travelers alike could eat, meet and amuse themselves.” [11]
Some of the teahouses and restaurants could accommodate for a large number of clients and the streets were swarming with hawkers selling all kinds of food. Some of the food sold by the hawkers was produced in large workshops in an almost industrial manner. [12]

I am convinced that without a simpler, lighter, easy and faster to produce steamer this commercial food industry couldn’t have developed in the same way. The big restaurants and banquet services needed a large amount of steamers to satisfy their patrons with an enormous variety of food. Its lightweight, the possibilities of stacking and heating up prefabricated food must have greatly contributed to the expansion of the hawker trade in the cities. I conclude that the bamboo steamer must have been one of the enablers for the mobile food commerce during the Sung period. The trolleys loaded with bamboo steamers in traditional dim sum places may be the living testimony of this past.

Now that the how and why of the bamboo steamers dispersion have been looked at, is there any possibility of finding out more about its origins?

The origin of steaming as a cooking method has already been mentioned, but also Bamboo as a material has had a rich past in Chinese civilization. Archeological findings of bamboo mats and baskets in Hemdou and Shisan in the Province of Zhejiang, which are estimated to be 4800 to 5300 years old, tell us that bamboo as a material has been used in China since the Neolithic period. [13] The traditions of bamboo basketry and steaming can both be traced back to the same period.

Needham refers to an object called “tan”, mentioned by Confucius, made out of bamboo basketry and used to serve rice. [14]

This proves that making household objects out of bamboo and steaming are both very ancient traditions and part of a rich cultural heritage. The bamboo steamer is the outcome of a combination of the two. Nineteenth century economist and social critic Thorstein Veblen explains in *The Instinct of Workmanship* that all industrial invention is the outcome of previous cultural knowledge. (See also Figure 3)

… the state of industrial arts is always a heritage out of the past; it is always in process of change, perhaps, but the substantial body of it is knowledge that has come down from earlier generations. [15].

The bamboo basket has been around for over 1000 years, yet its function and form have not been changed since. It has never ceased to exist through all periods in history, even in modern times. Interestingly the arrival of a variation of steamers in different materials, such as metal,
silicon and finally the pressure cooker and the electric rice cooker have not replaced the bamboo steamer, they exist along side. But the bamboo steamer seems to have replaced its predecessors made out of stone or pottery. (Figure 3)

This brings me to look more closely at bamboo as a material, and the assumption that it is an important factor of the bamboo steamers success.
Bamboo as a material and its significance for Chinese civilization

Bamboo is a wood that actually belongs to the sub family of grasses. [16] It unites the best attributes of both wood and grass. It grows fast as grass but tall and strong as wood, making it an abundant resource. 
There are 1200 species worldwide of which 400 are present in China. [17]
Bamboo is strong and resistant, yet flexible, light and hollow, which make it very versatile in its use. A simple object like the steamer basket is already illustrating the versatility of the material: with its woven cover, the circular bent structure and all of it held together with bamboo nails and bamboo strings.
Bamboo’s multiple purposes are ranging from the small or simple object, such as the broom of street sweepers, the calligraphy brush, or a tea whisk (Figure 4), to the highest scaffolds (Figure 5), pipes for water and gas or the complex engineering of a suspension bridge.

Depending on the application, the culms can be used as such in construction, split into splits and strips and woven together for basketry, twisted and plaited into ropes, or made into pulp for paper. Its hollowness allows it to be shaped into pipes, containers and musical instruments. These are just a few examples of the endless variety of objects human beings have made and are still making out of bamboo. Some of them can still be found in Hong Kong's Shops and Streets and others plus many more are listed and described in David Farrelly’s *Book of Bamboo*. [18]
“Bamboo the gift of gods” [19] The Colombian architect Oscar Hidalgo expresses with his book title the feeling of gratitude the Chinese must have had for this plant. Since the Neolithic age this amazing material has provided humans with shelter, furniture, tools, clothes, food, music, transmission of knowledge and so much more.

Su Tung Po also Su Shih a Chinese literate, poet, bamboo painter and statesman of the Sung dynasty wrote about bamboo

Plain but good
For my food,
For my bed,
A straw mat.

Would I whine at my fate
Or pine to get fat
With bamboo at my gate
To doctor my mood?

[...]

Su Tung Po [20]

As long as you have bamboo, there is no reason to complain, it provides you with everything you need. The possibilities of this material are almost unlimited.

For Farrelly, bamboo gave people the gift of creation. [21]
Industrialization and modern mass production techniques, such as injection molding have made us temporarily ignore bamboo as a material. The fast rate at which the nonrenewable natural resources of this planet are being used up, may redirect our attention towards this fabulous material.

Today new bamboo processing techniques are being introduced such as the fabrication of plywood and particleboards, molding, casting, and dying. [22]
The potential of this material starts to be recognized by architects and designers. Being cheap versatile and renewable, makes it a material for the future.
Naturally, as with every resource, even if it is abundant, it should be carefully managed, and bamboo composites should stay sustainable recyclable and non-toxic.
The Maker, the User and the System of Exchange

This chapter will focus on the maker of the bamboo steamer basket and his craft, as well as the connection between the maker, the user and the object.

How has the role of the maker and the relationship between object maker and user evolved over time?

The Artisan

I believe that in the beginning the maker and the user are the same person. An implicit personal need for a lighter easier to make tool for steaming, must have brought a person to invent the bamboo steamer basket, and he became its maker, but also the user since he created the tool to respond to one of his personal needs. The community then recognizes the value of this object and the maker/user becomes a maker, in other words an artisan and his skill becomes a tradition and part of the culture.

This humble inventor however, is part of a community and his creation is the result of the shared cultural knowledge of steaming as a cooking method and bamboo as a craft. (Figure 7)
“A new technological departure necessarily takes its rise in the workmanlike endeavors of given individuals, but it can do so only by force of their familiarity with the body of knowledge which the group already has in hand. [23]

Veblen describes the artisan, he calls him workman, as somebody “[who] draws on the resources of his own person alone;” he sees him as a free individual who owes nothing to anyone [24] He is the owner of his own labor and means. In the early stage of handicraft he even made the tools himself according to the needs of his craft. [25] French philosopher and social theorist Jean Baudrillard agrees with Veblen when he says:

“The status of the artisan is not only defined by the ownership of his "labor power" (as distinct from the slave) but, as distinct from the salaried worker, by the ownership of his "instruments of production." [26]

He (the artisan) is also in control of the distribution

“…The processes of distribution and consumption always take place in the cadre of integrated personal relations (self-subsistence, family, tribe, village, neighborhood).” [27]

Personal relations therefore influence price and value of an object. Veblen states that in the early days of the Handicraft system, price, he is calling it the just price, was determined by evaluating labor and living cost of the artisan. [28]
As already mentioned in the historical part, the Sung Period had a very developed urban culture and a commercial food industry.

For the bamboo steamer the simple artisan way of production and exchange within a community must not have lasted very long. An increase in demand lead to a division of tasks, between industry and business, and the bamboo steamer went into serial production.

In The instinct of workmanship Veblen describes how master workmen with means (tools and then capital) started to employ other workmen without means to meet the increasing demand. The master workman becomes an employer and salesman; his product is serial produced by employed labor in workshops. The more his business grows the more he withdraws from the actual craft and finally becomes a trader and financier. [29] \( (\text{Figure 7}) \)
“The increasingly wide differentiation between workmanship and salesmanship grew into a "division of labor" between industry and business, between industrial and pecuniary occupations, - a disjunction of ownership and its peculiar cares, privileges and proficiency from workmanship," [30]

According to Baudrillard this division between industry and labor interrupts the direct relationship between the object, its maker and its user, which he calls “symbolic exchange.” Everybody knows the experience of receiving an object made by someone one knows and appreciates, an object specially made for oneself, and how this personal touch enhances the value of that object. This relationship is intact in the artisan way of fabrication of the bamboo steamer,

“The artisan [being the owner of his labor and the instruments of production] “lives his work as a relation of symbolic exchange” [31]

and the exchange of the object takes place within a community defined through personal relations.

“A mode of social relations in which not only is the process of production controlled by the producer but in which the collective process remains internal to the group, and in which producers and consumers are the same people, above all defined through the reciprocity of the group.” [32] (Figure 8 below)
As described earlier, with the rise of the merchant class, division of labor and the introduction of the distribution chain, have broken those direct ties between the object, its maker and its user very early in the bamboo steamers existence. 
Could this the reason for the lack of attention and appreciation the bamboo steamer received throughout history?

Within the commercial system price and labor cost have become the subject of bargain. The price is arranged freely between buyer and seller and employer and employee. [33] The price of the object influences the labor cost, and when bargaining lowers the price of the product, the production cost has to follow either by making production more efficient through technical innovation or by bargaining with the worker about the price of his labor.

The bamboo basket, being a craft, due to its material, is probably subject to the latter. The simplicity of the object does not require a high level of skills, which greatly reduces the bargaining power of the craftsman, and I therefore have to conclude that this results in the exploitation of the worker.
Value and the perception of value

*Use value, Exchange Value and Symbolic value*

The bamboo steamer is a very cheap commodity, in a Hong Kong kitchenware shop they are sold for a price of 12 to 32 HK$ depending on the size. It is an object with a very low pecuniary value, but a very high use value (the qualitative value for the user)

“Quality in a product or service is not what the supplier puts in. It is what the customer gets out and is willing to pay for. A product is not “quality” because it is hard to make and cost a lot of money […]” [34]

What Drucker, a pioneer in management theory, says about quality is very true for the bamboo steamer. It is quality because of its usefulness to the consumer. It is useful because it more than perfectly serves its purpose: It can be used to steam or heat up almost any type of food, it is stackable and therefore it is possible not only to cook but also to serve large amounts of food because the stacking and the light weight make it also transportable. It is made out of a sustainable material, and last but not least it is beautiful in its simplicity. The exchange value for all these advantages is extremely low.
In sum, the high use value and the low exchange value result in a very interesting value for money ratio for the user.

One wonders how such a price can still generate profit, since it includes the cost of production: labor, tools and raw material, distribution cost: transportation and transaction, distributor profit and finally the dealer margin.

What does this mean for a different type of exchange value, the value of labor?
If a product is cheap, but still profitable, it means that the exchange value for the one who makes it is very low. How can the price of 12HK$ possibly cover the living expenses of the maker, plus all the previously listed costs and margins?
So nothing has changed for the worker, his manual labor is being exploited just as it was a thousand years ago. It is ironical that this very criticism of capitalism originated in socialist theory, which lead to the creation of communist states. And that one of these very states is now exploiting its human capital at the service of global economic system.
Wouldn’t the very high use value of the object justify a higher price?

A quick look in the www confirms my suspicion.

Bamboo Steamer Sets of 2 pieces and a cover are priced between $7.25 = HK$ 56.30 and $34.99 = HK$ 271.80. The Occident is full of potential users who are willing to pay a higher price for the bamboo steamer. Asian cooking, especially steaming is “en vogue” in the western world, obsessed with healthy food. It is addressing the issue of lifestyle. The bamboo steamer is not just a commodity anymore, but also a marketable object, and it is impossible to talk about lifestyle and marketing without mentioning what Baudrillard defined as the “sign value”. [35]

It is the value of distinction, the very value that keeps our consumer society going. It is the sign value of an object that convinces the consumer to pay a much higher price far beyond the value for money ratio.

There is a difference in the perception of the bamboo steamers value between the Orient and the Occident. What has been a useful commodity for Asians during a thousand years has become a lifestyle object in the West. Consumers are willing to pay more, because the value they project onto the object distinguishes them culturally and socially. After all, it is only the well educated and well off who can afford to indulge in cooking and eating as a hobby. This makes me conclude with a question: Considering the global reality of famine and starvation; isn’t the health- and organic food hype a form of what Veblen calls “conspicuous consumption”? [36]
Conclusion

Even though the bamboo steamer has existed for over a thousand years, neither the design of the object itself nor the artisan way of making it has changed. Even the commercial food industry has not changed significantly. Pictures taken in Hong Kong’s streets today show similar scenes to the ones depicted in Spring Festival along the River.

The bamboo steamer has already very early in its existence become a mass produced object, due to the economic prosperity of the Sung Civilization, which resulted in the expansion of commerce and commercial food industry.

Therefore the cycle of symbolic exchange (direct relation between object maker and user) was broken very early in the bamboo steamer’s existence. This is probably the reason for the very little attention and appreciation it received throughout history. It’s very high use value and very low exchange value result in a very interesting value for money ratio, but end in the exploitation of labor. During the thousand years of its existence it has been perceived as a mere commodity. Only recently it gained sign value in the western context of lifestyle distinction.

Although some aspects of its production raise very serious issues of inequality on this globe, the Bamboo steamer has been, and still is a highly useful and valuable object, and it is sustainable from an ecological point of view.

We will never know its exact origins, nor find out the name of its inventor but we can acknowledge the ingenious quality of his design.
In the Introduction to her book *Humble Masterpieces* Paola Antonelli, curator of Architecture and Design of the Museum of Modern Art in New York describes the traits of well-designed object: Usefulness is very important, but also meaning, the way the object is made, and the material used.

"one can measure the ethical substance of an object, the way it responsibly addresses both universal audience and a universal need to protect our limited resources. Moreover, an object needs to express the time and culture that generated it. When it comes to utilitarian objects, beauty is an outcome, a perception that derives from their accomplishments. […] The beauty of great design is both very complex and very simple." [37]

The bamboo steamer is a truly great design, culturally relevant, timeless, sustainable, useful, beautiful, and very humble. Therefore I will call it a humble masterpiece.
Reference

[19] Hidalgo, O. *Bamboo the Gift of Gods*: Title

Images

Figure 1: Detail of *Spring Festival along the River*
Figure 2: Detail of *Spring Festival along the River*
Figure 3: Comparative historical timeline
Figure 4: Tea whisk used in the Sung period, photographed at the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea ware in Hong Kong
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