

# SHOES AND SOCIAL FABRICS: Exploring the Journeys and Life-worlds of a Pair of Flip-flops

*In 2007, Professor Caroline Knowles received a British Academy Small Research Grant to explore an innovative means of compiling raw information about the world's complex interactions. Here she gives a taste of the project that took her from China to Ethiopia. The photographs are by her collaborator, Michael Tan.*

This research project is an experiment in what anthropologists call an 'object biography'.<sup>1</sup> Object biographies take the life trajectory of a single object as a vantage-point onto the landscapes, people and processes entangled with it. What can we learn about the social world by studying shoes? The project is an experiment in the synergies between anthropology/sociology on the one hand and art on the other. Michael Tan and I visited our field sites together. We brought different questions, perspectives and ways of working. We encountered and recorded our data (digitally) in different ways: him with the lens, me with a recorder, notebooks and maps.

Shoes are only one of millions of tiny circuits composing the global world of now. Shoes take us into the world of Chinese factories where they are made from plastics; and beyond as we trace their journeys in bundles, in containers and trucks that navigate the world's road and sea routes. Later, shoes make smaller journeys on feet as people navigate their world in them. A seemingly insignificant object reveals the organisation and operation of globalisation. Shoes take us into the heart of China's phenomenal growth, into the stories of globalisation from the Chinese standpoint. How shoes are produced throws a spotlight onto the people who make them; the materials they are made from illuminate global chains passing through the world of petrochemicals and on to consumers, distributed around the world.

Moving from production to consumption, it is through our shoes that we touch the ground on which our lives are played out; through shoes we navigate space, and its tangle of social relationships. Shoes log 'the footwork of dwelling'.<sup>2</sup> The shoes available to us, the shoes we choose, how and where we wear them are significant: shoes are full of information about the social world.

Among shoes, flip-flops are uniquely significant in providing access to information about the social world. No other shoe has its ubiquity: it is the world's highest-selling, most popular, shoe. It sells uncounted billions a year, massively outselling the world's second highest-selling shoe – the trainer. Flip-flops log global demographics: when world population rises so do flip-flop sales. It is unique in its reach across the social spectrum. It is worn by the wealthy who pay as much as \$200 for a beach or bathroom accessory; and it is worn by the poor because it is also the world's cheapest shoe. It can be bought for as little as 40 cents, and for millions without other footwear options, the flip-flop is a step

up from barefoot. A billion people still walk barefoot.<sup>3</sup> Flip-flops expose social inequalities between rich and poor countries, and between rich and poor people within the same country. They display social inequalities on a global scale.

We explored the biography of the flip-flop from its beginning, as granules of plastic made from petrochemicals cracked from crude oil. This took us to the factories where most of the world's flip-flops are made, in Fujian, in industrial villages surrounding Fuzhou, in South Eastern China, by migrant workers (Figures 1–3). Our investigations expose the human fabric animated in, and entwined with, plastics. Through a humble shoe, we unfolded stories of large-scale dislocation from country to town, and of the social upheaval of Chinese industrialisation and economic development.

Mrs L: The flip-flops we wear are given to us by the boss. But when we go outside of the factory we will wear the shoes that we buy. I have three pairs of shoes: one sandal, one flip-flop and one leather shoe.

Mr L: I have two pairs, a pair of flip-flops and a pair of leather shoes. Because I work here all the time, I hardly go out, so I wear flip-flops. I don't know which country the flip-flops I make are going to, but I do know they are for export. Some go out locally to local people. I have never thought about who wears this shoe. I can't think about that person. We just hope if the business goes well we will earn more money. We don't think about who wears them.

The L's are glad to live inside the factory because this saves money they would otherwise spend on accommodation. Plastic flip-flop production involves continuous human and machine *motion*, and flows of chemicals and hot plastics. It is noisy, plastic-fume-filled and dirty: a layer of dust settles over everything in the factory. Workers work twelve-hour shifts, production is continuous, hours and wages are regulated. Workers must be flexible, working when there are orders and finding other work when there are none. This is no simple story of Chinese exploitation. Made through its simplest technologies, the flip-flop serves as a starter in the world of factory production. Many factories began in peoples' homes. But profits are small and, if costs are not kept to a minimum, flip-flop production will move to Vietnam, or Sudan; in fact it is already moving to these places. Improvements in Chinese factory workers' conditions leave them jobless. Migrant workers from villages in Western China are an enthusiastic workforce away from the farm, and are prized by factory managers for their hard work and flexibility.

Mrs L: It takes 36 hours to get to my village. 36 hours only on a train, then I have to take land transport, a truck or a car, another four hours to the village. I go back for school holidays. There are two school



Figure 1: *The Chinese factory. Finished – a woman trimmer presents her work.*



Figure 2:  
*Making soles.*



Figure 3:  
*Attaching straps.*



Figure 4: *On the market in Addis Ababa.*

holidays but I only go back for one, for two months. I have a daughter who is 13 and studying in secondary school. My parents are taking care of her. I am not sure if my son will stay here or go back to my village in Sichuan. Depending on the conditions [in which they live and work] we will see where we will send him to school. ... I miss Sichuan a lot; that is why I go back every year. My parents and my daughter are there. I don't want to be outside; I want to be in the village. Every time I go back there, I don't want to come back here. I will go back for good one day. I don't know when I can do that, because when the family run out of money they ask me, and I feel bad. So I don't know when I will go back there. ... People from Sichuan work all over China because there are no jobs – it's not developed; because there is no money there and we have parents to take care of. It's obvious...

Farming doesn't bring us any money and we have parents who needed to be fed, and we have living expenses, that's why we came here to work. Sichuan is not one of the developed zones in China, so there is not any prospect there. People who farm there plant enough to sustain themselves, but that excludes living expenses such as education and other stocks such as meat, poultry, fish – things that are beyond our planting. The price increases make it hard for us, and then ageing parents, medication and the cost of living. So with our farming self-sustaining method, it doesn't sustain any more, so we have to go out and work to feed us...

My train ticket [to Fuzhou] was from my parents, through the money they earned from farming. But a friend from my village gave me a place to stay here and when I earned money I gave it back. She helped me get out of Sichuan in the nineties when Fujian was opening up ... and I found work in a strap factory.

Chinese flip-flops are shipped all over the world. Their story ends in the garbage dump, on the outskirts of a city in Africa, in South America, in Europe or in America; where bits of coloured plastic brighten the collected detritus of contemporary life. All countries, even those which successfully protect domestic flip-flop production, buy Chinese flip-flops.

We followed only one of hundreds of distribution trails that lead from Fuzhou: to Ethiopia. Ethiopia is one of the strongest emerging markets for Chinese goods. Ethiopia combines a high population – in excess of 72 million – with a low average income and relative political stability, making it an ideal target market for cheap shoes. Ethiopia's population cannot afford alternatives. It has a shoe industry, it even has a flip-flop industry; but it cannot defend it from Chinese competition. Flip-flops log the Chinese footprint in Africa. They reveal the difficulties of shipping through the Red Sea and piracy off Somalia. They reveal the difficulties of smuggling to avoid import taxes, and distribution systems that pass through Addis' biggest market, Mercato (Figure 4), and on to smaller markets and corner kiosks through a network of



Figure 5: A wearer of flip-flops on the streets of Addis Ababa.



Figure 6: A home-made alternative to flip-flops.

traders throughout the city. They also reveal the routine lives of the urban Ethiopians who trade and wear them as they navigate Addis Ababa on foot and by bus.

Z navigates Addis Ababa in two pairs of shoes: a pair of year-old flip-flops repaired with a nail and a pair of plastic ballet slippers. She was barefoot until she was 19 years old. Before flip-flops were available, her husband made the children's shoes, recycling tyre rubber in the process (Figure 6). She gets her dark, widow's clothes, from the salvage. Now aged 60, she lives in a small house with her casually employed grown-up children and young grand-children. She sells potatoes, onions and tomatoes on a piece of cloth outside her door (Figure 5).

We follow her to the market: she moves through the crowds we struggle with like a fish, buying vegetables for her stall. We follow her back and into her neighbour's house for a coffee ceremony and to church where she prays every day. We log her routes through the city and her way of walking: all in a pair of flip-flops.

The stories of globalisation are told as invisible financial and technological flows. But globalisation is also *lived* as quotidian detail by millions of ordinary people whose lives are as networked as capital and technology, if by different processes. Investigating how people make and live with objects provides valuable information about the human fabric of what we glibly call globalisation. It is these, social, aspects that we accessed through the shoe. It revealed the concerns and circumstances of Chinese workers. It exposed a small piece of the Chinese footprint in Africa, in the lives of those who rely on the flip-flop as a fundamental technology of mobility. The global world runs on human effort expended in factories and on the streets of the cities and rural areas in the global South.

#### Notes

- 1 Object biography is a research technique used by Kopytoff who famously investigated the social activity surrounding a used car in Africa. It was popularised by Appadurai in his edited collection, *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- 2 Tim Ingold, 'Culture on the Ground: The World Perceived Through Feet', *Material Culture*, 9:3 (2004), 315–340.
- 3 Edward Tenner, *Our Own Devices* (New York: Knopf, Random House, 2003), p. 53.

---

Caroline Knowles is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Centre for Urban and Community Research at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

---



---

Michael Tan is an artist and Assistant Professor based in the School of Art, Design and Media at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

---