



Elena Nam. A Review of **Dashkovsky P. K., Karymova S. M.** *Veshch v traditsionnoi kulture narodov Tsentralnoi Azii: filosofsko-kulturologicheskoe issledovanie: Monografiya* [The Thing in the Traditional Culture of the Peoples of Central Asia: A Philosophical and Cultural Study. Monograph]. Barnaul: Izdatelstvo Altaiskogo universiteta, 2012, 252 pp.¹

The Multiple Functions of a Thing

This book has been written within the framework of an interdisciplinary approach, and is a scholarly discourse at the boundaries of philosophy, culturology, ethnology, archaeology and history. As a rule, such multi-faceted research (from the point of view of its approach to the problem) claims not only to introduce new material and to analyse it in accordance with existing theoretical approaches, but also to expand and renew the current methodological basis and to adapt theories in order to analyse specific cultural (or historical) realities. This sort of research is very topical at the present stage of development of knowledge in the humanities, where the question of stating methodological problems is acute.

The first section of the monograph, which takes up almost half the text, is devoted to working out the methodological basis for the study of the material environment. Given that the theoretical approaches to the study of the material world of traditional societies are insufficiently developed, this structure is justified. The multiple functions of a thing, the variety of its properties and cultural status, require special research approaches that take account of all the details of the world of things that a human being constructs.

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In their search for methodological approaches to the study of the material environment of the nomads of Central Asia, the authors have turned first and foremost to the philosophical heritage of the neo-Kantians and Ernst Cassirer, supplementing his theory of symbolic forms with the structural-semiotic method. Applying Cassirer's theory to the study of the thing in traditional society is quite natural and promising, since it allows the thing to be examined as a symbol functioning in various semantic segments of the cultural space. The historico-philosophical excursus that lays bare the ontological foundations of the existence of the thing in the categories of material and form, space and time, and relation and property also has its methodological value. The result of the analysis opens up the prospect of studying the thing in a unity of ontological and semiotic characteristics, which significantly expands the possibilities for interpreting and systematising the historico-cultural material.

In attempting to examine the historical dynamic of the ontological status of the thing the authors have set themselves quite a hard task. Without claiming to have made a systematic description of the whole diversity of functioning of the material environment at various historical periods, they have noted 'only the leading shifts and dominant notes in the relationship with the thing within the system of landmarks in the *Weltanschauung* of the typical subject of the culture' (p. 63). However, the text gives no explanation of what 'the typical subject of the culture' is, nor of whose *Weltanschauung* the landmarks have been subjected to scientific analysis. The authors also lack clarity in their definition of historical periods and the accompanying chronology, and also in their definition of the cultural and historical specifics of the construction of the material environment. They distinguish the following historical periods: the archaic, antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, modernity, modernism and post-modernism, but their chronological framework lacks definition. It is impossible to understand what the archaic period means (though primeval man and the primeval mentality are discussed) since antiquity also includes archaic Greece and archaic Rome. It is stated that 'the abstract lay outside the scope of mythological thinking, and the thing was devoid of ontological characteristics in the consciousness of the typical subject of archaic culture' (p. 64), which essentially contradicts the conclusions about the ontological status of the thing drawn above. Only when we reach the Renaissance does it become clear from the context that we are dealing with European culture, and modernism and post-modernism are viewed only within the framework of Western Europe. When, in summing up their analysis, the authors draw the vector of the dynamics of the ontological status of the thing, they completely lose sight of antiquity, and treat recent times and post-modernism as

different historical periods, although in the established chronology of historical periods used by historians the recent period includes our post-modern contemporaneity. An excessively generalised presentation of material has led to an over-simplified treatment, which is connected not least with the complexity of the task. It would seem that it would have been better for the historical dynamics of the ontological status of the thing to have been examined in a separate specialised study.

The second section of the monograph is not only an illustration of the heuristic possibilities of the methodology proposed, but also a perfectly independent research text. Using a significant corpus of ethnographic, archaeological and folkloric material from the traditional culture of Central Asian nomads, an analysis of their dwellings, clothing and equipment for preparing, preserving and transporting food has been conducted. The use of material from antique and ancient Indian sources to supplement the picture of the material environment of the nomadic world is also valuable. Within the logic of this discourse it is quite natural to look first at the dwelling as the most significant part of human inhabited space, in which the main semiogenetic elements of human existence are concentrated. The dwelling, which makes a particular cosmological scheme real and embodies the macrocosmic characteristics of the universe, was analysed both horizontally and vertically. Through an examination of the construction of the dwelling, its decoration and contents, several semantic layers were identified — the utilitarian, cosmological and social — and at the same time the absence of any anthropomorphic notions in the etymology of its constituent parts was noted. In their study of the semiotic and symbolic aspect of the nomads' clothing, the author's attention is mainly drawn to the symbolism of the choice of materials in a mythological context, the range of colours, and the means and processes whereby the objects are created. The presentation of new data on the reconstruction and symbolic interpretation of the headdresses of the nomads of the Scytho-Saka period is of great significance. In the examination of the symbolic functions of vessels for preparing and storing food, the material expression of the anthropological aspect of the thing, the so-called 'organoprojection' (p. 185) is particularly interesting. As the most important results of the work we may note the identification of the forms in which things function in traditional culture: thing as sign, thing as symbol, thing as mediator, thing as artefact, thing as marker and thing as subject.

The authors have also attempted to follow the changes in the ontological and semiotic characteristics of the thing in the modern world. This opens out new prospects for research, which can be traced in the logic of this discourse: 1) the study of the existence of traditional things in the modern world; 2) the identification of the

ontological and semiotic field of things which reflect the fundamental *Weltanschauung* of contemporary societies; 3) tracing the dynamics of movement of human culture in its making sense of the world of things from traditional forms to modern ones. The authors' conclusion is the desymbolisation of the thing, monofunctionality and the unification of symbolic loads, which leads to a reduction in the ontological forms of the manifestation of the thing in twentieth-century culture (p. 201). The evaluation of the processes of the historical transformation of functional and semantic characteristics of the material world in such terms as 'destruction' and 'impoverishment' may not be entirely correct, taking into account the changes in the vector of the relationship to the world of things in Western social/cultural anthropology expressed in particular within material culture studies. It may be imagined that it would also be interesting to take another direction in studying the semantic dynamics of the material world, and to study the peculiarities of the incorporation of objects produced by modern technology into the life and spiritual culture of societies which maintain and reproduce traditional systems of values.

In conclusion I should like to comment on certain theses put forward in this work that in my view are somewhat controversial. The book's title declares it to be a study of the traditional culture of the peoples of Central Asia. However, in determining its spatial and temporal frameworks it is the nomadic world — which was the dominant, but not the only one in this region — which receives the most attention. The distinction between pragmatic and cultural factors in the creation of things, particularly dwellings (p. 88) may not have been completely thought through. Is the pragmatic function of things not one of the most important characteristics, alongside the symbolic, of any culture? The more so as the authors themselves speak of a strict pragmatics of the material world forming the person's lifestyle and mentality (p. 87). A. K. Baiburin has written on the pragmatics of things in traditional societies, and proposes that it should be regarded in two aspects, the utilitarian and the semiotic. Both aspects of pragmatics are vitally essential in their application to the social aspect of human activity, and in this sense semiotic pragmatics is just as 'pragmatic' as utilitarian pragmatics [Baiburin 1991: 33]. The authors also note that a living mythology regulating its existence is a most important condition for preserving the ontological status of a traditional thing, and that such objects are now incorporated into life 'artificially'. At the same time it is stated that in this 'artificial' existence a thing is more mythic than within a living tradition (p. 194). To all appearances we are dealing with two different understandings of the 'myth' and the 'mythic', although the authors never qualify the nuances of meaning in their use of these terms.

Overall, despite these reservations, the monograph under review is an interesting work, innovative in many ways, which embraces and activates a wide range of research possibilities in the study of the material world within the space of culture in both its synchronic and diachronic aspects, and may be interesting to a wide circle of specialists within the humanities — philosophers, culturologists, ethnographers and anthropologists.

References

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