

BOOK REVIEW
Laurence Coderre,
Newborn Socialist Things: Materiality in Maoist China
(Durham: Duke University Press, 2021)

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Newborn Socialist Things is a fascinating, unique, and far-reaching inquiry into “the media environment of the Cultural Revolution and the ways in which its constituent elements” – newborn things that sprung up in abundance – “engaged with contemporaneous discourses of materiality and material culture” (4). In an effort to take a further step beyond the limits of textual or cultural studies-oriented approaches, this book concomitantly participates in a wider scholarly discussion around the audiovisual and material culture in Mao’s China and broader shift in media studies towards material specificities and object-oriented media archaeology. Laurence Coderre draws on the works of Ban Wang,¹ Denise Y. Ho,² Jie Li,³ Laikwan Pang,⁴ Marc Steinberg,⁵ Paul Clark,⁶ Tina Mai Chen,⁷ and Xiaomei Chen⁸ (to name a few) on *yangbanxi* (样板戏), museum exhibits, media mix, fashion, and films and brings these influential trends in dialogue with each other through the critical lens of newborn socialist things (社会主义新生事物).

The origination of the term can be traced back to party theorist Sun Dingguo’s (孙定国) canonical essay “Newborn things are invincible” (新生事物是不可战胜的) published in 1959, which stipulated that newborn socialist things had to “struggle against ‘old things’, forge their own path, be in accordance with developmental principles, and have a long, bright future” (2). For Coderre, these newborn things and the old things they were supposed to displace are parallelly “un-thing-like”, and should be considered, instead, as “constellations, of objects and bodies brought into relation with each other, of institutions produced by and through those objects and bodies, and of the social formations they helped to construct” (6). Likewise, her primary materials, consisting of physical objects, literary works, newspapers, exhibitions, textbooks, film, magazines, records,

operas, and posters, span a variety of media that played a part in these constellations and challenge us to reconsider the system of Chinese socialism as well as human subjectivity and agency in the Mao era.

An interesting amalgam of such constellations include the recorded soundscape (chapter 1), retail customer services (chapter 2), store window displays and Maoist porcelain sculptures (chapter 3), political economic pedagogical texts (chapter 4), *yangbanxi* characters, actors, and paraphernalia (chapter 5), and ornamented mirrors (chapter 6). Lest the structure of the book appears shambolic with tenuously-related materials comingling in seemingly discrete chapters, it is intended precisely to blur intermedia and interdisciplinary boundaries and denote the transgressive nature of newborn socialist things. Calling attention to the “question of relationality”, Coderre posits that newborn socialist things exist in a state of in-betweenness and straddle “the commodity form and the material construction of Chinese socialist culture” (12), in a way that is reminiscent of how the commodity mediates social and material relations in the Marxian political economy. Each chapter, accordingly, examines the role of a newborn socialist thing in mediating the materiality and competing priorities of socialist construction. In the first two chapters, mediation is tied to the national territorialization and modernization project; in Chapters 3 and 4, it is undertaken to mitigate the dangers posed by commodities; and in the final chapters, to produce the ideal socialist subject. Underlying continuities could also be discerned as the materials introduced in earlier chapters often resurface as part of the constellations addressed in the latter half of the book, embodying the entanglements and interactivity in the world of newborn socialist things.

Chapter 1 centers on sounds – a newborn socialist thing with conspicuous mediation qualities – and a compelling discussion of the “sonic imaginary” of Chinese socialism. Drawing cautious comparisons with the “radiofication” of the Soviet Union and the sonic aesthetics of the Nazi regime, Coderre is mindful of not oversimplifying and equating the Cultural Revolution soundscape with a “centralized sonic totality” (32). For one, she sheds light on the dynamic process of sounding the Cultural Revolution, which produces space instead of merely “penetrating” existing spaces, in the words of Nicole Huang and Andrew F. Jones (35). Broadcasters extended the reach of the wired loudspeaker network to the national frontier and territorialized the nation as an acoustic space by means of the crank-operated record player and the flexi disc. In official representations, they brought modernity to backwater regions and the ethnic minorities, who were relegated to the primitive. The party-state’s goal of conjuring an imagined community through aural saturation, simultaneous listening, and the regimentation of time promoted by the loudspeaker network, however, failed to materialize into an actual totalitarian soundscape. Rather, Coderre argues that sounds flowed through porous boundaries as people residing at the frontiers could tune in to enemy radios, while those populating the countryside or cities played western classical music records in private. Listened alone and yet, forging an alternative “imagined listening community” (49), these sounds constitute a fleeting space much like Hakim Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZs). Access to recorded sound technologies in the PRC is at once perceived to be an evidence of socialist progress whilst signifying the inception of a cherished but precarious network among individual subjects.

The focus of the second and third chapters, socialist retail, is embroiled in a similar contradiction. It attests to socialist advancement by offering bountiful commodities, but also manifests capitalist tendencies incongruous with socialist commitments to thriftiness. Furthermore, the continued reliance on currency – used concurrently with ration coupons – rendered ever more problematic and suspicious the commodity status of goods. In Chapter 2, Coderre examines how retail salespeople mediated these tensions by providing innovative services, peddling goods to minority groups at the geographical

frontiers, and aligning with the socialist mantra of “serving the masses”. Greater emphasis was placed on enhancing customer service to situate themselves on the safe side of the class struggle in face of a “shrinking range of politically acceptable commercial and consumer behaviors” as retail businesses were increasingly targeted by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution (70). Female-oriented commodities, in particular, bearing remnants of the republican “modern girl” and associated with narcissistic self-presentation (elaborated in chapter 6) received most of the brunt. Turning to two opera works, the 1974 rendition of the *pingju*, *Xiangyang Store* (向阳商店) and a Hunanese *huaguxi*, *Delivering Goods on the Road* (送货路上), the rest of the chapter traces how the salesman protagonists went far beyond the call of duty to deliver “material emblems of prosperity” to remote villages on behalf of the party, fend off class enemies, and help consumers restrain and channel their desires to goods that are in line with socialist principles (76).

If the previous chapter expounds on how the model socialist retailer reconciled the discord between material needs and the ideological underpinnings of socialism, Chapter 3 registers that the same effect ought to be achieved through the mediation of visual representation in retail outlets or “productivist display” – an aesthetic framework coined by Coderre – which “cast[s] commodities destined for exchange and consumption as mere products of labor” (84). As she explains, productivist display hinges on accentuating the role of proletarian labor and subsuming consumption under production for political appropriateness. Her case study of Jingdezhen Porcelain Sculpture Factory subsequently reveals that the much-celebrated proletarian production is primarily mechanized but porcelain sculpting remained heavily reliant on human expertise. Nonetheless, Maoist porcelain figurines were still considered acceptable because they embraced realist aesthetics. Although one might wonder if this could indeed be extrapolated to the everyday goods displayed in retail outlets, Coderre concludes that productivism is “concerned with an *aesthetics* of production” rather than the “actual means of production” (103). Referencing Denise Y. Ho’s study of “politics *on display*”, she directs her

research towards a “politics of display” and the “surfacescape” of decorative objects and shop windows of department stores (104). Understood through this framework, the promotion of Mao’s “image, words, and Thought” in the retail display window (106), then, as she suggests, retains “the visual stimulation of consumer desire” and transforms Mao into a “commodity” (108).

Consequently, Coderre points out that while productivist display justified itself by extolling labor, it does not efface the issues of consumption: “the ultimate motivation for production remains the improvement of living standards *as measured by consumption*” (109). Putting forth a dense but rewarding argument, she connects Walter Benjamin’s take on “commodity-on-display” with the socialist window display, which is also overwhelmingly representational and divorced from the lived experience or production. As noted by Benjamin, display inculcates a desire for the new and a futurity. In the case of newborn socialist things, they embed the not-yet-within-reach communist utopia in the present. Commodities, on the other hand, portend a progress fundamentally at odds with Marxist historiography. Caught in a “clash of temporalities”, they are both suspended in time and share dubious commonalities in that neither have actually departed from the status quo (111).

Chapter 4 turns to another newborn socialist thing that sought to rein in commodity fetishism: political economic texts. Coderre sees in Russian Constructivism artists’ attempt to reimagine commodities as comradely things (the subject of Christina Kiaer’s *Imagine No Possessions*⁹) a socialist predicament of coexisting with and reinventing consumer practices. As the existence of the socialist commodity demanded justification, responsibility fell upon political economy theory and publications, which are essentially knowledge transmitted through language. Whereas Soviet textbooks vindicated commodities as long as the means of production were not privately owned, their Chinese counterparts developed by the Shanghai School of Political Economics, such as *Fundamentals of Political Economy* (政治经济学基础知识), demystified the commodity by distinguishing between its form (形式) that remained

capitalistic and its essence (本质) that is unveiled after the revolution. Through close readings of *A Commodity’s Tale* (商品自述) and Deng Kesheng’s *Autobiography of a Commodity* (商品自传), Coderre contrasts their differing approaches toward anthropomorphizing the commodity-narrator and argues that the former adapts the Chinese genre of pseudobiography (假传) and evokes Marx’s speaking commodity in *Capital* to quell anxieties over consumer culture by stripping the commodity of its material specificity. However, such preferences for “abstraction in lieu of specificity”, which also find precedents in *Fundamentals*, supplant “the materiality of things” with “the materiality of language” (137). Instead of filtering the fetish from commodity fetishism, the socialist political economic discourse became fetishized and the issue turned out to be, ultimately, “a problem of the relationship between language and things” (138).

In chapter 5, Coderre explores how the mass (re)production of amateur *yangbanxi* performances transform the bodies of the performers into a malleable medium, mediating between the ideals of the state and the individual. She first explicates the concept of “performance as transformation” whereby one is expected to “become the hero one portrays”, with the example of a short story that charts the development of an amateur actor (143). In a well-developed ensuing analysis, arguably the highlight of the book, she acknowledges the ubiquitousness of performative politics on- and offstage during the Cultural Revolution (as addressed by many scholars) and complements this analytical frame of “performance” with Bolter and Grusin’s theory of remediation and Marc Steinberg’s Media Mix. The stationary poses of *yangbanxi* heroes or *liangxiang* (亮相) emanate an intensity and culminate in a “dynamic stillness” that enabled their images to circulate across media forms. This media mix industry and its character merchandizing techniques produced the revolutionary hero “through the dedicated and repeated consumption of performances and remediation”, thereby dissolving the amateur’s body into an object of consumption (169). The resultant abstraction and alienation of one’s body is further exacerbated as *yangbanxi* characters are formulaic and simultaneously individualized, and these “tensions between

particularity and typicality, medium specificity and abstraction, production and consumption” were all played out on the actor’s body. Notwithstanding how *yangbanxi* was part of the state’s apparatuses to mold the idealized new person (新人) and actors playing villains consciously distanced themselves from their character, unabating fears of misfire and ever tightening requirements imposed to standardize the performances betrayed an uneasiness about the impossibility of “the absolute correspondence of bodily training and ideological self-fashioning” (142).

The final and most intriguing chapter looks at tabletop and wall-hanging mirrors, ornamented with *yangbanxi* heroes decals and other forms of politically potent imagery/discourse, that partake in the above-discussed process of (re)mediation, albeit of the gazer. Packaged as a *yangbanxi* paraphernalia, the mirrors carry the representation of the hero who takes the shape of the professional actor who first embodied him. The abstraction of the actor’s body into a signifier is part and parcel of the technologies of stardom, harnessed to advertise the communist ideology. As Coderre delineates, the function of the mirror as mirror though, may be controversial for it exemplifies an obsession with one’s outer appearance but could also be appropriately utilized as a tool for introspection and (re)formation. The *yangbanxi* decals thus served as salient guides depicting an ideal version of oneself that one should model after. Mirror gazing becomes an image-making process and the gazer’s reflection becomes an image, permitting her “to become formally equivalent to the figural representations of models” and see herself, too, as a model, to be molded (186).

A valuable contribution to media studies writ large, this study on Maoist China bespeaks a need to integrate interpretative readings with the social, cultural, political economic, and material concerns specific to Chinese socialism. One would also appreciate that Coderre highlights continuities between her period of focus and pre- and post-Cultural Revolution contexts throughout the book, suggesting that her findings might be extendable in both direction, to the present market age or the utopian Great Leap era. This provides fertile openings for spin-off researches that may complicate

or enrich her argument on the inherent tensions and contradictions of the Chinese socialist condition and probably warrant a separate and more detailed investigation. Apart from corroborating how studies on the culture and mediascape of the Cultural Revolution continue to be ripe with possibilities, this illuminating book constitutes a rich resource for scholars pursuing research in related fields.

I am deeply grateful to *The PRC History Review* for the opportunity to review this book and engage with the author by asking a few questions. The first of which is concerned with the fact that many of the material objects entwined in the constellations of newborn socialist things came to function as commodities, which partially demonstrates how the two are “rhetorically and conceptually linked” as proposed by Coderre in the introduction (9). In view of such inextricable relationships, what benefits does categorizing them as newborn socialist things offer, in contrast to evaluating these media objects simply as socialist commodities? How does a focus on the materiality of newborn socialist things enhance our understanding of Chinese socialism and provide insights beyond what a study of the commodity-form might generate?

Finally, I am also curious about the translation of *shehui zhuyi xinsheng shiwu*. The original Chinese term “*shiwu*” can refer to both social phenomena and their material manifestations, while the English translation and description of “newborn socialist things” might be seen as subtly invoking Heidegger’s *Ding*, Bill Brown’s thing theory, Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of assemblages, and Bruno Latour’s actor-network. How did you decide on its translation and how should we understand the connection between your conceptualization of newborn socialist things and contemporary theories of new materialism that emphasize object agency? As mediators, do newborn socialist things have agency?

¹ Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

² Denise Y. Ho, *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

³ Jie Li, *Utopian Ruins: A Memorial Museum of the Mao Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

⁴ Laikwan Pang, *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production during China's Cultural Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017).

⁵ Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

⁶ Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁷ Tina Mai Chen, "Dressing for the Party: Clothing, Citizenship, and Gender-Formation in Mao's China," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 5, no. 2 (2001): 143-71.

⁸ Xiaomei Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

⁹ Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

Response

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I am sincerely grateful to *PRC History Review* for both soliciting a review of *Newborn Socialist Things* and allowing me to respond to the questions raised therein. To Yuan Ting Chan, I extend my thanks for her time and careful assessment of my work. I trust her take will prove helpful to those trying to understand the book's methodology and gauge its relevance to them.

Chan is correct that the socialist commodity and the tension it embodies are central to *Newborn Socialist Things* as a whole. Indeed, the dissertation out of which it grew was titled "Socialist Commodities." That said, the problem encapsulated by the socialist commodity—namely, the persistence of pre-revolutionary social relations and modes of exchange in post-revolutionary times—is only half of a larger historical equation. I see the newborn socialist thing as an attempt to solve the predicament engendered by the commodity's necessary production and circulation, well past claims of teleological progress and the purported end of capitalism. Put simply, the promise of the newborn socialist thing as forerunner of a would-be communist utopia resides in its dialectical relationship with the commodity-form. A study of that dialectic, which the book endeavors to be, requires attention to both constituent terms.

On a more personal level, it was important to me that my work have some relevance to our highly commodified present and, likely, our even more commodified future. In other words, I wanted the book to speak to the concerns of our time in some way. Insofar as my own politics drive me to question the exigencies of contemporary capitalism, I share with the historical actors I write about the hope that we might collectively think our way out of commodity relations. That, ultimately, is the imaginary potential—the inspirational, aspirational value—of the newborn socialist thing. And it was important to me to center that as much as I could.

Having said all that, I feel I should clarify that *Newborn Socialist Things*'s focus is primarily discursive rather than empirical. The archive on which I rely includes material objects, which were experienced in the world, to be sure, but I approach these objects through the lens of contemporaneous, official Party discourse on materiality and political economy. While the book is, in this sense, very much a historical study, it probes the history of socialism as a project. It makes few claims of empiricist truth when it comes to the realization (or not) of that project.

The question of agency is an interesting one. I hesitate to say that newborn things *have* agency per se, but I would proffer that they are agentive. Allow me to explain: As a constellation of objects, people, and social forms, what distinguishes a newborn thing from a morass of potentially infinite connections is a kind of historical enactment. In other words, a newborn thing's constituent relations are operative in some way. In this operativeness, for lack of a better word, one might see agency. If I am reticent to do so, it is because it is difficult, for me at least, to posit agency without reifying the newborn socialist thing in a manner quite counter to its critical potential. To the extent that we can say that newborn socialist things impact their environment without reducing them or obfuscating the dynamic relations they comprise, then yes, I suppose they have agency. To say they are agentive is my way of hedging in that direction.

As to the particular translation of *xinsheng shiwu*, I am afraid I cannot take credit for that. "Newborn thing" is the official English formulation appearing in publications such as *Peking Review* and *China Reconstructs*. As Chan points out, however, it has the decided advantage of resonating with current discussions in the humanities about materiality. That is indeed why I kept this rendering. Although scholarship on "Thing Theory" (often of a particularly Heideggerian bent) as well as the so-

called New Materialisms has greatly informed my thinking, it was important to me to devise a conceptual framework grounded in the specific cultural and historical enterprise of Chinese socialism itself. Perhaps this is the Area Studies chip on my shoulder, but I wanted to demonstrate that the Chinese socialist “case” was not merely something to which “theory,” developed in a euro-American context, could be applied. Rather, Chinese socialism not only produced theory as a historical matter; it could be the fount of its now.