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Socialist Commodities: Consuming *Yangbanxi* in the Cultural Revolution

By

Laurence Hiley Smith Coderre

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Chinese Language

in the

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Andrew F. Jones, Chair

Professor Sophie Volpp

Professor Jocelyne Guilbault

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Abstract

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Whereas contemporary postsocialist China is typically depicted in terms of rampant, ideologically vacuous commodification, the Mao era—and especially the apogee of Maoist fervor, the Cultural Revolution (1966-76)—is normally cast as a time of ubiquitous politics and scarce goods. Indeed, the Cultural Revolution landscape of things has been strangely stripped of the mundane: with the exception of the likeness and words of Mao Zedong, the material culture of the Cultural Revolution is most notably characterized as a void out of which the postsocialist world of commodity consumption sprang fully formed. This dissertation instead examines how interactions between individuals and things during the Cultural Revolution were themselves intertwined with the circulation and consumption of ‘socialist commodities.’ I focus on objects associated with the *yangbanxi*, or ‘model performances,’ as a critical part of ‘real existing’ Chinese socialism, with which individuals interacted on a daily basis. Hailed as the pinnacle of socialist artistic production, the *yangbanxi* repertoire of Beijing operas, ballets, and orchestral works was intended to act as vanguard in the revolution in the performing arts. Objects promoting the *yangbanxi* were therefore produced spanning every conceivable form. I focus here on paraphernalia in three ‘media’: recorded sound, porcelain statuettes, and amateur bodies. Interactions with these instances of *yangbanxi* remediation, I argue, constituted a critical way in which revolutionary subjects and socialist commodities produced themselves as such. Moreover, this dissertation ultimately contends that, in this way, socialist commodity consumption made the consumer subjectivities of the postsocialist period possible.

I begin by focusing on the theorization of the socialist commodity and its role as articulated in Chinese political economic texts of the Cultural Revolution. I argue that these works, intended to counteract the enchantment of commodity fetishism through the popularization of Marxist political economy, were themselves fetishistic in their privileging of discourse over materiality. A similar predicament arises with the notion of the ‘newborn socialist thing’ (*shehuizhuyi xinsheng shiwu*) as well, supposed herald of the transition to commodity-free communism. Too often the relational nature of newborn socialist things meant that they were not really things at all. I ask how we might nonetheless benefit from thinking about the *yangbanxi*—quintessential newborn socialist things in their own right—as relationally complex, systems of remediation and,

furthermore, how those systems' economies of signification mirror the workings of the socialist commodity. As I argue in my second chapter, the production and organization of revolutionary space was enmeshed with a complex topography of consumption in which persisting pre-revolutionary notions of (bourgeois) domesticity played an enduring role. Drawing on vinyl records, flexi-discs, and published photographs, I examine the positioning of the citizen-subject as an aural consumer of *yangbanxi* in a 'public' soundscape, which was nonetheless facilitated by that most 'domestic' of recorded sound technologies, the record player. The home itself remained a crucial site of socialist consumption, and in my next chapter, I consider the importance of *yangbanxi* porcelain statuettes, as components of politically *au courant* home decoration, in emplotting subjects in socialist time as well as a temporality very much reminiscent of the always-already *passé* postsocialist commodity. Moreover, these pieces of home decor also constituted idealized, prescriptive models for the sculpting of bodies and subjectivities, particularly for amateur performers of *yangbanxi*, the focus of my final, full chapter. Implicated in a highly (re)mediated system, the performer's very body is ultimately rendered as exchangeable and consumable as the record or ceramic tchotchke. I close the dissertation with a coda, in which I analyze contemporary discourse on collecting Cultural Revolution memorabilia and what I read as a continued longing for an alternative to the — now explicitly capitalist — commodity-form.

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A dissertation is an opportunity to show one's mettle as a fledgling scholar, and as a genre, it is therefore preoccupied with flaunting—rather than effacing—the labor that went into producing it. This reversal often makes for an uncommonly tedious reading experience—all the more reason, then, to marvel at those brave souls who read and commented on the many incarnations of the following chapters. To the extent that this dissertation says something important and says it intelligibly, it is thanks to them.

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Introduction

Right now our country employs a commodity system. The wage system is also unequal; we have an eight-tier wage system and so on. This can only be restrained by the dictatorship of the proletariat. Thus, if Lin Biao and his ilk were to take power, it would be easy for them to bring about a capitalist system. Therefore, we must read Marxist-Leninist books.

—Mao Zedong¹

It seems fitting to begin this dissertation as so many texts did during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), that is, with a quotation from Chairman Mao. The revelation of a new “important directive” (*zhongyao zhiishi*) such as this was always accompanied with much fanfare, in part because of the quasi-sacred status of their source and in part because it was an important indicator of which way the political winds were blowing at that given moment. The above quotation was first published on the front page of *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) on February 22, 1975² in an article that was also later reprinted in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) theoretical organ, *Red Flag* (*Hongqi*), on March 1.³ It was part of Mao's call for the general populace to study theory (*lilun*), especially that pertaining to the dictatorship of the proletariat (*wuchanjieji zhuanzheng*), and it proved hugely influential—and eminently reproducible—in the remaining two years of the Cultural Revolution. Its timing is significant in so far as it coincides with economic reforms enacted by an increasingly powerful Deng Xiaoping. We might therefore interpret this particular directive as a check of sorts on these budding changes, changes that would come to full fruition after 1978.

For us looking back, however, the quotation seems most significant for its terse acknowledgment of the central role of commodities in socialist society. In his typically succinct style, Mao issues a categorical verdict on the status of the Chinese system: even under the dictatorship of the proletariat, China has—an albeit limited—commodity economy. This may well strike us as incongruous, if not controversial: commodity economies are the stuff of capitalism. Indeed, Marx famously begins *Capital*, his comprehensive treatment of the capitalist system, with an analysis of its most fundamental component: the commodity-form. What to do, then, with the notion of *socialist* commodities? Were they not meant to be left behind? As I will show in this dissertation, the answers Chinese leaders and political economists provided to this question varied quite widely during the socialist period; theorists differed as to the reason for commodities' continued existence, their relative necessity and

¹ My translation.

² "Makesi, Engesi, Liening lun wuchanjieji zhuanzheng" 马克思、恩格斯、列宁论无产阶级专政 [Marx, Engels, and Lenin on the Dictatorship of the Proletariat], *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 [People's Daily] February 22, 1975, 1-4.

³ "Makesi, Engesi, Liening lun wuchanjieji zhuanzheng" 马克思、恩格斯、列宁论无产阶级专政 [Marx, Engels, and Lenin on the Dictatorship of the Proletariat], *Hongqi* 红旗 [Red Flag] no. 3 (1975): 3-19.

appropriateness, the amount of danger they posed to the forward march toward communism, and the policies required to contain whatever danger that might be. But what everyone seems to have agreed upon, despite all these other differences of opinion, is precisely that which Mao proclaims so matter-of-factly above and yet seems so significant to us now—that socialist commodities could and did indeed exist.

In the pages and chapters that follow, I take this apparent consensus as a starting point in order to consider the ways in which the paradox of the socialist commodity was negotiated in the years of the Cultural Revolution. On the one hand, this was a matter of squaring a largely theoretical circle, of grappling with a riddle at the heart of Chinese socialist political economy as it developed beyond Marx. On the other hand, however, the realities and contradictions of the socialist commodity-form made themselves felt and were informed by everyday interactions between people and things, and it is on these interactions that I focus here. Specifically, I examine elements of the material culture associated with the *yangbanxi*, or ‘model performances,’ as components within a complex system of remediation. Radically intermedial, the *yangbanxi* afford us an opportunity to examine a variety of people-thing interactions both cumulatively and across media forms. I argue that it is precisely through this intermedial relationship—the subjectivities as well as materialities it helps craft and produce—that we can best understand the inner workings of the Cultural Revolution socialist commodity and the ways in which it paved the way for the market commodification of the postsocialist era.

Consumption and the Rhetorics of Transition

Insofar as surprise at Mao’s verdict on the socialist economy with which I began is any indication, the historiographic stakes of the socialist commodity are high. But in truth, Mao was not so much saying something new as he was restating a fundamental tenet of Chinese socialist political economy. This is not to discount its significance. This simple restating did much to bolster the position of what came to be known as the Gang of Four—Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen. They were the ones most closely associated with the dominant position in Cultural Revolution-period political economy concerning commodity production: namely, that one found in commodities a soil rich for the development of revisionism. According to this view, as long as there were commodities, capitalism and the bourgeoisie would always threaten to reappear. And yet, one could not rid oneself of commodities all together; a commodity-free society was the promise of a future communism, not the reality of contemporary socialism. Commodities were a holdover from pre-Liberation, capitalist society, a necessary evil during the long socialist interim. The order of the day, then—even for the most ‘radical’ faction of the CCP during the Cultural Revolution—was not the elimination of commodities, but rather, their appropriate limitation. In short, the risk they posed needed to be properly managed, that is to say, with a weather eye on the communist horizon.

If this compromise sounds oddly familiar, it is because determining the appropriate role for the commodity under Chinese (post)socialism continues to be a difficult task for the CCP. Indeed, as has no doubt become crystal-clear since the beginning of China's Reform and Opening Up (*gaige kaifang*) effort in the 1980s, the fine line between restricting the scope of commodity production under the dictatorship of the proletariat and the promotion of commodity consumption in the name of teleological progress and/or 'modernization' is nearly impossible to maintain. 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi*) is increasingly seen as a misnomer, the Party's vain attempt to maintain ideological appearances despite having for all intents and purposes given up the dream of a communist future.

The market having long-since usurped the plan, 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics' seems a more accurate representation of the contemporary scene. The uniqueness of this explicitly Chinese brand of capitalism—its defining Chinese characteristics—more often than not amounts to an alibi for the persistence of the CCP in the era of the market. As Kevin Latham put it in 2002, "[t]he starting assumption for many debates about the reform period has been that economic liberalization must at the very least have opened up chances for accompanying political liberalization."⁴ But we might take this a step further. To the extent that this expectation still prevails in 2015, the Communist Party appears developmentally out of step with the Chinese economy. If, to paraphrase Yiching Wu, 'really existing socialism' is understood as a mere "detour in the long history of capitalism,"⁵ an aberration to be overcome, then questions concerning the CCP's continuing hold on power and claim to legitimacy present themselves as something of a puzzle—having outlived the Leninist party-states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is nonetheless expected to meet much the same fate. In many ways, it has indeed travelled along the same path, insofar as a similar shift towards large-scale privatization and marketization has taken place. Yet the continued survival of the CCP—well in excess of its life expectancy, if the basic assumption of economic liberalization is to be believed—cries out for explanation.

One such explanation contends that commodity consumption, particularly since Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour (*nan xun*) in 1992, has acted as a "social palliative." Consumption is said to have filled the ideological void left in the wake of Mao's death, while also having the added benefit of "[keeping] the population satisfied when the previous certainties collapsed in the reform period. Communism and the class struggle, the foundations of political understanding in the People's Republic since 1949, may have been left behind, but the rewards they had always promised were to be found in the present rather than postponed to some never arriving future."⁶ This argument has been all the more persuasive for jibing neatly with a widely held explanation of the

⁴ Kevin Latham, "Rethinking Chinese Consumption: Social Palliatives and the Rhetorics of Transition in Postsocialist China," in *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, ed. C M Hann (London: Routledge, 2002), 220.

⁵ Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 238.

⁶ Latham, "Rethinking Chinese Consumption", 221.

collapse of the USSR and the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe. In her influential *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*, for example, Katherine Verdery argues that the failure of socialism was rooted in the mismanagement of consumption and consumer desire, mismanagement that fostered much more than mere shortage. It produced an abiding tension:

Even as the regimes prevented people from consuming by not making goods available, they insisted that under socialism, the standard of living would constantly improve. This stimulated consumer appetites, perhaps with an eye to fostering increased effort and tying people into the system. Moreover, socialist ideology presented consumption as a 'right.' The system's organization exacerbated consumer desire further by frustrating it and thereby making it the focus of effort, resistance, and discontent.⁷

Discontent led to collapse. Insofar as that discontent might be quelled through economic growth, commodity consumption becomes a social palliative, a means to maintain the CCP's hold on power.

There is something decidedly self-defeating in this line of reasoning. On the one hand, the 'free' exchange of commodities is saddled with the responsibility of political liberalization, while on the other hand, by dissipating the political potential of frustrated desire, the consumption of those same commodities is blamed for the persistence of an illiberal regime.⁸ In other words, the revolution must be marketized—even if to its own inevitable detriment. And 'revolution' is precisely the term, for if Maoist socialism has become capitalism with Chinese characteristics, the process by which this has taken place is often described as a sudden, irrevocable change very much on the order of 1949. Consider the 2000 volume, edited by Deborah Davis, *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, whose very title speaks to its underlying historiographic assumptions of rupture.⁹ Yiching Wu has also noted "the prevalent use of such temporally or spatially inflected metaphors as 'U-turn,' 'restoration,' 'retreat,' and 'break'" in scholarly work, all of which imply an attempt not only to disavow the Maoist past, but also to unmake the socialist project.¹⁰ "Rhetorics of transition," predicated on a notion of economic development, may well "enable the Party to defer utopia, or the new range of utopias, into the future once again,"¹¹ thereby maintaining its legitimacy in the meantime. But to the extent that this is the case, these rhetorics depend on a denial of contemporary China's indebtedness to the Mao era as much as they do on a vision of tomorrow as consumerist paradise.

⁷ Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 28.

⁸ See, for example, Michael Dutton, "From Culture Industry to Mao Industry: A Greek Tragedy", *boundary 2* 32, no. 2 (2005): 151-167.

⁹ *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, ed. Deborah Davis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins* 226.

¹¹ Latham, "Rethinking Chinese Consumption", 231.

The failure to acknowledge and investigate the precise ways in which Chinese socialism has become what it is (and is not) today has been described as “a [deep] critical lacuna,” namely, “the absence of a historically grounded understanding of the vicissitudes of Chinese socialism, with all its complexities and contradictions.”¹² Given the political expectations and burdens so often placed on marketization and consumption in characterizations of contemporary China, few vicissitudes of Chinese socialism could be more worthy of our attention—or have been so consistently misunderstood—than its fraught relationship with commodities in the period directly preceding the reforms: the Cultural Revolution. The future utopia espoused by the CCP today may well be consumerist, but we have yet to fully grapple with how the utopian vision of the Mao era was rooted in those terms as well. In what ways has the imagined future and its attendant modes of interaction between people and things stayed the same, and what might that mean for the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of socialism and/or capitalism with Chinese characteristics?

In his treatment of the ‘Mao Craze’ (*Mao re*) of the early 1990s—a fad which saw a resurgence in the popularity of all-things-Mao—for example, Michael Dutton speaks of an emerging Mao industry. Despite the use of iconography from the Cultural Revolution, however, Dutton argues that there is no political power to be found in these recycled images; they present no imminent danger to the Party Mao had once nearly destroyed from within. Rendered commodified kitsch, the objects of the Mao Craze have supposedly been politically neutered. “The commodity form seduces rather than challenges. One can challenge a claim to truth, but how does one challenge a theme park?”¹³ For Dutton, the commodified Mao can neither challenge nor be challenged, to the detriment of all. But what if the commodified Mao wasn’t altogether new? What if we approached the circulation of Mao’s likeness and words during the Cultural Revolution as an intermedial economy of signification? What if Mao, in a sense, had been commodified all along?

These questions are intended to be provocative, and, I confess, I am likely giving Dutton short shrift here, stretching his argument beyond its intended scope. My point in doing so, however, is this: (socialist) commodities were seductive and insidious long before Deng Xiaoping’s reforms. Indeed, they were recognized and criticized as such, even as they remained integral to the socialist enterprise. The logic of the commodity continued to suffuse everyday life, and though the material conditions of daily existence have undoubtedly changed dramatically for many Chinese, that underlying logic persists today in much the same way. What this ultimately means, then, is that we need to reevaluate what we think we know about Chinese socialism, commodities, and the way they structure and manifest interactions between people and things.

Model Materialities

¹² Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins* 227.

¹³ Dutton, "From Culture Industry to Mao Industry", 165.

My particular focus here is on the so-called *yangbanxi*, a notoriously tricky term to translate.¹⁴ The word itself was coined in 1966 in order to refer to a group of five Beijing operas, two ballets, and one symphonic work, intended to act as vanguard in the revolution in the performing arts. More precisely, as ‘*yangban*’ or ‘models’—a term first used in the context of agricultural fields during the Great Leap Forward (1958-60)—these pieces were endorsed as exemplars of what the socialist arts could achieve. ‘*Yangbanxi*’ therefore initially denoted a status—in contradistinction to ‘experimental performances’ (*shiyanxi*)—more than a repertoire per se, though it has since acquired that connotation.¹⁵ Each work was shepherded by Jiang Qing, Mao’s third wife and a former Shanghai actress, meticulously crafted, and relentlessly revised, often over a period of many years. By 1976, a total of eighteen works, the vast majority of which are set prior to 1949, had earned the ‘model’ designation, with the original eight *yangbanxi*, in particular, holding an unparalleled position of dominance within the official cultural sphere.

In keeping with their cultural importance, the *yangbanxi* have been the subject of a considerable amount of scholarship over the past few decades, most of it written in Chinese and published in the PRC.¹⁶ The primary concern of much of this work is the reconstruction and demystification of the production history of the *yangbanxi*, with an emphasis on Jiang Qing’s noxious role in their creation. Such research often bears a striking resemblance to the Cultural Revolution memoir, an extraordinarily successful genre since at least the mid-1990s, if not before.¹⁷ Much less has been written in English, no doubt due to the (until recently) prevailing sentiment that, as propaganda, the model works could be of little interest to literary and film scholars. This view has waned of late, especially in Chinese film studies, and there have been a number of important publications on the subject in the past few years, with Paul Clark’s *The Chinese Cultural Revolution* and Barbara Mittler’s *A Continuous Revolution* chief among them.¹⁸

¹⁴ The difficulty lies in the notion of *xi*, which is most commonly used to refer to Chinese operatic genres, but here clearly comprises other performance forms as well. For simplicity’s sake, I will use the original Chinese term.

¹⁵ For more on the origins of the term, see Hua-Yuan Li Mowry, *Yang-pan Hsi - New Theater in China*, Studies in Chinese Communist Terminology (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies/University of California, 1973).

¹⁶ See, most famously, Dai Jiafang 戴嘉枋, *Yangbanxi de fengfengyuyu: Jiang Qing, yangbanxi ji neimu* 样板戏的风风雨雨：江青、样板戏及内幕 [Storms of the Model Theater: Jiang Qing, the Model theater, and the Inside Story] (Beijing: Zhishi chubanshe, 1995).

¹⁷ Liang Xiaosheng’s *Confession of a Red Guard* (*Yige hongweibing de zibai*), for example, was published as early as 1988.

¹⁸ Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*, Harvard East Asian Monographs (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

Despite what much of this scholarship might lead us to believe, however, the reach of the *yangbanxi* extended well beyond the professional performing arts. As part of the popularization campaign, begun in 1970, that resulted in the film productions which survive today, *yangbanxi*-related paraphernalia was produced spanning every conceivable media form, including three of central interest to this dissertation: recorded sound, porcelain statuettes, and amateur performance. This proliferation of forms and objects, which Clark has called the “ideological commodification of culture”¹⁹ firmly enconces the model performances as part and parcel of the material quotidian of the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, it is my contention that *yangbanxi* ancillaries, recognizably akin to contemporary “cross-genre product tie-ins,”²⁰ constitute a system of remediation through which we can investigate the workings of the socialist commodity—‘ideological’ or otherwise—as produced by the interactions between people and things. Furthermore, much *yangbanxi* paraphernalia has reemerged in the postsocialist period as unabashed market commodities, meaning that these things are perfectly placed for not only an examination of Cultural Revolution material interactions, but also an investigation of the relationship between the circulation and consumption of things during the Cultural Revolution and postsocialist market commodification.

Unfortunately, little of the interest the *yangbanxi* have garnered thus far has sought to address either the proliferation of *yangbanxi* ancillaries or even the material environment in which *yangbanxi* were shown or performed.²¹ Rather, when addressed by literary and film scholars, the *yangbanxi* have generally been treated as ‘texts’ to be ‘read,’ with little regard for the materiality of any given ‘text,’ which, through the act of interpretation, is rendered into a series of ‘signs.’ As Elaine Freedgood points out in a different context,²² this kind of “metaphorical” reading comes at the expense of the material specificity of the thing in question. That the *yangbanxi* were very much designed with a particular economy of signs in mind—the *yangbanxi* are ‘models’ precisely because their every aspect is ideologically and semiotically overdetermined—should not distract us from the fact that they and their related objects took particular media forms and were experienced (and used) in terms of the specific properties and possibilities attending those media forms. To ‘read’ the film version of *The Red Lantern* (*Hong deng ji*) or a plate emblazoned with its protagonist, Li Yuhe, as simply a string of signs or a sign in itself is to lose sight of the film-as-film, the plate-as-plate, and, as a result, their fundamental material incommensurability.

¹⁹ Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution* 4.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Nicole Huang’s work is perhaps the most notable exception. See, for example, Nicole Huang, “Sun-facing Courtyards: Urban Communal Culture in Mid-1970s’ Shanghai”, *East Asian History* no. 25-26 (2003): 161-182; “Azalea Mountain and Late Mao Culture”, *The Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 2-3 (2010): 402-425.

²² Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

As Bjørnar Olsen suggests, this is a pitfall present in all semiotic approaches to things,²³ but it is especially problematic in the context of the Cultural Revolution, where the reduction of things to signs threatens to forsake the experiential in the name of highly-crafted official discourse. By overlooking the level at which a thing was interacted with, i.e. the thing-as-thing, one is left precisely with the economy of signification CCP ‘propagandists,’ for lack of a better term, were so at pains to construct. One is left, in other words, with the intended ‘message’ as opposed to the thing as it was experienced; the plate with Li Yuhe’s image becomes a symbol of CCP power and thereby ceases, in a sense, to be something on which one might eat. In this particular case, this *de facto* blindness to things actually serves to reinforce a notion of propaganda as a fundamentally top-down instrument of ideological indoctrination, strangely divorced from the material conditions of its own existence.

By contrast, this dissertation seeks to turn this notion on its head. Examining *yangbanxi*-related paraphernalia in multiple media and modes of circulation and consumption—that is, by approaching them as *things* in all their “robust materiality,” as Krisztina Fehérváry puts it²⁴—forces us to ask a fundamentally different type of question: not what did *yangbanxi* ancillaries mean, but rather what did they do and how did they do it. How did different media interact with one another? What are the mechanics of *yangbanxi* remediation and what kind of subjectivities did these processes make possible? Note that these are not precisely questions of audience reception, a subject that presents significant methodological challenges at the best of times. Trying to get a handle on *yangbanxi* reception in the Cultural Revolution is a veritable methodological minefield.²⁵ Instead, what I carry out in this dissertation constitutes a hermeneutic enterprise, an interpretative project, in which I approach media and discursive objects as materially specific, interactive, and productive. In the chapters that follow, I attempt to skirt the edges of metaphor in favor of metonymy, as Freedgood suggests, by tracing the connections and relationships implied and produced by the media forms themselves.

In adopting this approach, however, we must be careful not to simply reproduce socialist discourses about things and, by extension, the circulation and consumption of “state-socialist goods.” While the goal may be to understand socialist material culture in a manner informed by its own assumptions, priorities, and contradictions, it is still imperative “to dislodge the actual experience of state-socialist material culture from its more admirable ideological claims—whether genuine or convenient.”²⁶ With this in mind, Fehérváry, for one, makes very pointed, often

²³ Bjørnar Olsen, *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2010).

²⁴ Krisztina Fehérváry, *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), ix.

²⁵ On the one hand, there is the problem of the limited archive, the pitfalls of memory discourse, and the coercive power of the state. On the other hand, one quickly finds oneself in the troublesome territory of measuring propagandistic efficacy.

²⁶ Krisztina Fehérváry, "Goods and States: The Political Logic of State-Socialist Material Culture", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 2 (2009): 426-459.

anachronistic use of terms such as ‘branding’ and ‘commodities’ in her work on the material culture of socialist Hungary,²⁷ a move that is in keeping with much of the scholarship on socialist ‘consumer culture’ in Eastern Europe and the former-Soviet Union. This is perhaps in part because these discussions often address, in one way or another, the reemergence of socialist-era goods, styles, and designs within the context of postsocialist/post-communist nostalgia or, in (East) Germany, *ostalgie*.²⁸ The use of such terminology also serves as a corrective of sorts in the face of a prevalent view, heavily influenced by János Kornai’s assessment of Communist political economy as fundamentally structured by shortage and scarcity,²⁹ “in which the absence of a ‘capitalist’ economy somehow implicate[s] the absence of consumer culture—with its accompanying panoply of dreams and frustrations, forms of sociality, and social distinctions.”³⁰ Within this context, the use of such terms as ‘consumer culture,’ ‘brand,’ and ‘commodity’ is purposefully ahistorical in the name of scholarly intervention, but it risks simply replacing one theoretical discourse on things with another.

I deploy the notion of the commodity in this dissertation in a very different manner and with a very different aim. My goal here is to examine and recuperate the term as it was used during the Cultural Revolution. In other words, my interest in the commodity-form is deeply historical. When I speak of the ‘socialist commodity’ in the coming pages, I am referring to the concept as it emerged and evolved within Chinese socialist discourses of political economy and material culture. In this sense, it is meant as a culturally and historically specific, indigenous term, the clarification and understanding of which is one of the principle motivations for this investigation. That Karl Marx’s theory of the commodity figures prominently in this dissertation should not surprise us, then, for it is precisely this theory that informed the materials under examination, its shortcomings no less frustrating in the Cultural Revolution than they are today—which is exactly the point.

Structure of the Dissertation

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ina Merkel’s work is particularly influential in this area, explicitly linking the postsocialist popularity of German Democratic Republic ‘brands’ with East German socialist ‘consumer culture’ prior to reunification. See such important works as Ina Merkel, “Consumer Culture in the GDR, or How the Struggle for Antimodernity Was Lost on the Battleground of Consumer Culture,” in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern and Matthias Judt (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute; Cambridge University Press, 1998), 281-299; “From Stigma to Cult: Changing Meanings in East German Consumer Culture,” in *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 249-270.

²⁹ János Kornai, *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

³⁰ Fehérváry, *Politics in Color and Concrete* ix.

In Chapter 1, I examine the ways in which Chinese political economy theorized the paradox of the socialist commodity, paying particular attention to the commodity-form's latent, counterrevolutionary potential as it was understood in the 1970s. I focus on a number of pedagogical texts and efforts to popularize political economic theory as part of a massive production of discourse intended to unmask the inner workings of the commodity. The idea was to try to counteract the dangers of commodity fetishism through the spread of political economic knowledge. In practice, however, rather than focus on use-value, for example, as we might expect, this discourse itself fetishized the commodity as an abstraction, doing little to grapple with the materiality of social relations as was purportedly its aim. A similar difficulty manifests itself in the conceptualization of the 'newborn socialist thing,' would-be herald of the coming communist utopia. As the commodity's eventual replacement in embryo, the newborn socialist thing was more commonly an idea than a single, identifiable object. Even so, what happens when we start taking the intermedial implications—seldom fully articulated—of the newborn socialist thing seriously? How does it change our approach to the *yangbanxi*—often referred to as newborn socialist things—as a system of remediation? And what are the implications of doing so for our understanding of the socialist commodity?

Chapter 2 examines aural consumption of the *yangbanxi* as well as other forms of recorded sound in the Cultural Revolution. Specifically, I focus on the sound technologies of the loudspeaker and the record player. The modes of address of these technologies—the ways in which they facilitated interactions and forged subjectivities—was crucial to the production of a sonic topography dominated by two mutually constitutive kinds of space: spaces of 'mass publicity' and spaces of what I call 'socialist domesticity.' Contrary to popular conceptions, this sonic topography attests to the fact that the associations between the bourgeois home and commodity consumption were not broken in the Cultural Revolution, so much as bent. I trace the displacement of the record player from the urban sitting room to China's most remote areas, where it functioned as part of a project to 'civilize' minority peoples. Aural consumption of the frontier became a mark of modernity, while traveling salespeople and traveling broadcasters occupy and patrol the same spaces of supposed developmental backwardness. It is here at the both figurative and literal margins of the socialist endeavor, I argue, that we see the extent to which the revolutionary citizen-subject was still imagined as a consumer of both media and socialist commodities.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the peculiar temporality of *yangbanxi* porcelain sculptures. Despite porcelain's historically elitist associations and the figurine's ties to petit-bourgeois interiors, porcelain statuettes representing *yangbanxi* heroes were churned out by such renowned porcelain production centers as Jingdezhen, China's 'porcelain capital,' throughout the Cultural Revolution. A rewriting of porcelain-making historiography, the creation of new, massive factories, and the construction of porcelain producers as members of the proletariat helped rehabilitate porcelain as a politically acceptable medium in the Mao period. Meanwhile, aesthetic norms took a turn to the socialist realist, privileging fixity and permanence over motion and transience. These tendencies were further strengthened in the case of statuettes depicting the *yangbanxi*, formally evocative of the theatrical practice of *liangxiang*, or

‘striking a pose,’ heavily used in the staged model performances. As momentary ruptures in narrative continuity, *liangxiang* are characterized by a frozen temporality, likewise found in the porcelain statuette. This frozen time is also notably reminiscent of socialist temporality, as we might expect, as the endless deferment of utopia. On the other hand, however, as objects of decoration, these statuettes are bound up with the temporality of the (socialist) commodity-on-display as a form of representation as well, reminding us that the time of revolution and the time of the commodity are often equally stalled.

I move to the world of amateur performance in Chapter 4, which I approach as a form of *yangbanxi* remediation. Within this framework, the bodies of amateur actors become a medium on par with vinyl and porcelain. The key to this remedial process is a notion of performance as a technology of transformation, which acts on the plastic bodies and, ideally, subjectivities of the masses, to produce a nation of *yangbanxi* heroes in the model of the porcelain figurines discussed in Chapter 3. Playing a character becomes a way to actually become that character ‘in real life,’ much as the kiln effects the transmutation of clay and glaze into porcelain. Anxiety remains, however, over the possibility that this process might fail, allowing the would-be saboteur—the class enemy hidden in plain sight—an opening to undermine the revolution. The transformation sought through performance is predicated on the complete correspondence of ‘appearance’ and ‘essence,’ but what if the faith placed in that correspondence is exploited by the counterrevolutionary? And what are we to make of the fact that the amateur’s participation in an economy of signification—i.e. her act of *yangbanxi* remediation—renders her body alienable and consumable even as she pursues the dream of a radically unitary subjectivity?

I end the dissertation with a coda devoted to an analysis of contemporary discourse concerning the collection of Cultural Revolution memorabilia. Specifically, I focus on the construction of two related figures, the collector/curator and the collector/investor, their dominant modes of collection, the curatorial and the investitive, and the extent to which they rely on the figure of the naïve dupe. But as denigrated as the dupe may be, he speaks to a longing for a form of interaction between people and things outside the realm of the commodity consumption. As a result, I argue that the purported dupe actually speaks to concerns very much reminiscent of those at the heart of the debate about socialist commodities during the Mao era.

Chapter 1:
Dangerous Liaisons: The Problem of the Commodity and the Advent of Newborn Socialist Things

The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.

-Karl Marx, *Capital*¹

When does a thing cease to be a thing? When it becomes a commodity. Or at least that seems to be Marx's answer in the famous opening chapter of *Capital*. The commodity "transcends sensuousness;" it leaves sensuousness—or what I will be calling materiality—behind, and in this effort to transcend, the logic of capitalism reveals itself. As Bill Brown notes, "Marx presents *Capital* as a hermeneutic enterprise: an extended interpretation of one structural fact, the fact that the commodity is both a thing and not a thing at all, 'its sensuous characteristics...extinguished.'"² For the most part, Marx focuses on the un-thing-ness of the commodity, its successful transcendence of particularity and reliance on the leveling operations of exchange-value. But the image of the dancing table speaks to something else: the failure of transcendence and a sensuous materiality that will not be denied. "Only the table emerges, out of *Capital*, as an object worth imagining or an object worth having, as an object personified while remaining very much an object."³ For Brown, the table is symptomatic of that which exists in excess to analysis and that with which Marx cannot grapple. The commodity's failure to fully transcend particularity bespeaks Marx's fundamental failure to account for materiality in political economic discourse, to unravel the magic of capitalism while nonetheless addressing something beyond its logic.

The Cultural Revolution-era theories of the socialist commodity and its would-be alternative—the newborn socialist thing (*shehui zhuyi xinsheng shiwu*)—that I examine in this chapter reproduce this failure. On the one hand, this is thoroughly unsurprising: these theories are, after all, rooted in Marx—albeit with a heavy dose of Stalin. On the other hand, however, these theories were also meant to speak to a developmental stage beyond capitalism and therefore to solve precisely those problems capitalism could not solve. When we consider the paradox of the socialist commodity as presented in Chinese political economic texts of the Cultural Revolution and their antecedents in the 1950s, we find that such problems merely took on new forms. It

¹ Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret," in *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1990), 163-164.

² Bill Brown, "The Tyranny of Things (Trivia in Karl Marx and Mark Twain)", *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 442-469.

³ *Ibid.*, 451.

turns out that restricting the scope of commodity production on behalf of the dictatorship of the proletariat sits uncomfortably close to promoting commodity consumption in the name of teleological progress and/or ‘modernization.’ Since well before the tortured articulation of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi*) in the 1980s or Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour (*nan xun*) in 1992, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has had a fraught relationship with both discussing and consuming commodities. The in-between-ness of the socialist stage of history necessitates and justifies the commodity. But at what cost? How do we stave off the commodity’s tendency to bewitch us? How do we put the social relations it concretizes—revolutionary as they may or may not be—center stage without denying the particularity of that concreteness?

In this chapter, I examine how Chinese political economy dealt with these questions and the impact of these attempts on how we conceive of the *yangbanxi* and their consumption in the Cultural Revolution. I begin by addressing the role of political economy in the theorization of socialism-as-liminality before turning to Stalin’s influence on understandings of the socialist commodity. I then examine the importance of Soviet political economic texts during the Great Leap Forward (1958-60) in laying the foundation for the campaigns to popularize political economy in the 1970s. This effort to popularize knowledge of the socialist commodity was advanced as a way to disarm and counteract the commodity-form’s revisionist potential. In my examination of pedagogical efforts to weaponize political economy for this purpose, however, I find that, in lieu of occluding social relations with thingly ones, materiality was simply swapped out for discourse. The same sleight of hand is found, I argue, in the conceptualization of newborn socialist things, which, despite their name, tend to lapse into abstraction as well. I end this chapter by asking what it would mean to approach the *yangbanxi* as newborn socialist things without falling into this trap.

Socialism as Interregnum

As was discussed in the Introduction, although scholarship devoted to the material culture of Chinese socialism is sorely lacking, comparable work on the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union has flourished over the past decade. Even so, attention to the intellectual historical environment in which interactions between people and things took place in these contexts remains limited. One of the most significant exceptions to this rule is Christina Kiaer’s masterful *Imagine No Possessions*. In this fascinating study of Russian Constructivism in the early and mid-1920s, Kiaer examines a group of artists’ dogged pursuit of “socialist objects”—objects with which one would interact not in terms of possession and commodification, but rather in terms of fellowship and camaraderie. The ultimate goal was an alternative to the relationship between the laborer and the product of her labor, the appropriator and the appropriated, constitutive of the capitalist commodity-form as Karl Marx had described it. For the Constructivists, the eventual elimination of the commodity, the very cornerstone of the capitalist system the October Revolution promised to overturn, was a task the trained artist’s eye could help accomplish. Artists knew how to see in a

way that was radically different from the factory engineer, and it was precisely this difference—an understanding of form and aesthetics rather than a detailed knowledge of production processes—which, they argued, made them invaluable in the effort to create a new kind of material culture, one characterized by comradely things. For their part, factory engineers seem to have found this line of argument less than convincing, and it is, for Kiaer, the fact that the Constructivists strove to bring about a socialist world of things and thingly relations, while simultaneously dealing with the demands of profit-minded entrepreneurs and pleasure-seeking consumers, that sets them apart from many other explicitly political artistic movements. “Constructivism is unique among the politically engaged avant-gardes of the twentieth century because it imagined ‘no possessions’ both from the perspective of an achieved socialist revolution that made such imagining more than Utopian dreaming and—at the same time—from within the commodity culture of NEP [Lenin’s New Economic Policy (1921-c.1928)] that forced that imagining to contend with the present reality of commodity-desiring human subjects.”⁴ It is the tension between these two sets of demands that makes the Constructivist endeavor so intriguing and Kiaer’s analysis of it likewise so compelling.

As Karl Gerth’s important work on Chinese advertising in the 1950s reminds us, directing and negotiating consumer desire proved a thorny problem for CCP policy-makers and newspaper editors, just as it had for their Soviet forbearers.⁵ Indeed, what Kiaer sees as a tension constitutive of Russian Constructivism’s singular place in art history might better be understood as one attempt among many to contend with a predicament facing the socialist enterprise in general, namely, how to reinvent and recast consumer practices in politically acceptable—if not emancipatory—terms. Crucial to grappling with these questions was, in turn, an even more fundamental and potentially unsettling issue: what exactly was it that was being consumed? Were they commodities? If so, how could one make sense of their continued existence and function during the transition from capitalism to communism, i.e. socialism? The Constructivists may primarily have been concerned with the aesthetics of the “socialist object” and the remaking of the everyday, but the ‘problem’ of the commodity and commodification extended far beyond the question of how any given object looked and the interactions between person and thing facilitated by that look. How would a socialist economy be structured? What role should commodities play in it? Would this role change over time? Would commodities fade away gradually or all at once? Could they exist in the absence of private ownership and capitalist exploitation? As in the first few years of the PRC, Soviet commodities flourished in the 1920s, which therefore required the artists Kiaer discusses to imagine “socialist objects” in explicitly commodified terms. But even during the Stalinist period, when nationalized industry and collectivized agriculture dominated the Soviet economy, the paradox of the socialist commodity persisted. If anything, the tension inherent in the concept arguably became even more acute as the overtly capitalist policies of the past were left behind. It

⁴ Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 26.

⁵ Karl Gerth, "Compromising with Consumerism in Socialist China: Transnational Flows and Internal Tensions in Socialist Advertising", *Past & Present* 218, suppl. 8 (2013): 203-232.

is one thing to be forced to wrestle with commodity desire in the context of semiprivate enterprise, but it is quite another to be facing the same issues once socialism has been 'achieved.'

In truth, it was not just the initial years of communist rule—both in the USSR and later in China—that were understood as a transitional period. Rather, socialism writ large was conceptualized as an in-between phase heralding the communist utopia, always in the offing. This suspended state of 'almost but not quite' creates a temporality peculiar to socialism, which I discuss in relation to the temporality of commodities during the Cultural Revolution in a subsequent chapter. The crucial point here is that the socialist project, whether aesthetic or economic, is transitional by definition; it pertains to the interim. And like other liminalities, the particulars of this socialist stage of historical development were not mapped out in any detail. Even for the CCP after 1949, which could turn to the example set by the Soviet Union, establishing the delimitations of socialist governance and the structure of the socialist economy required a considerable amount of on-the-job learning. They had no definitive guide for the task at hand. Despite the fact that the call for the first textbook on the political economy of socialism in the Soviet Union was made as early as 1936, such a volume was still under discussion in 1951 and was not published until the fall of 1954. It was only then that the descriptively titled *Political Economy: A Textbook* (*Politicheskaya ekonomia: Uchebnik*),⁶ translated from Russian into Chinese, among many other languages, codified existing economic practices. In other words, 'socialist economies' were established as such long before their authoritative theorization was available, during which time commodities continued to circulate. Indeed, the socialist economy as it emerged seemed to be very much dependent on the commodity-form. Part of the task facing (Chinese) political economists, then, was to explain this dependence in such a way that socialism nonetheless constituted a historical advance over the capitalist system it had usurped. While the socialist commodity looked suspiciously like its capitalist cousin—a situation Russian Constructivists had attempted to change through aesthetics—it was up to socialist political economy as a discipline to explain how they differed theoretically, that is, how they could be recuperated as temporary and necessary improvements over the commodities analyzed by Marx.

This was by no means a straightforward or perfunctory task. As I will demonstrate in the following pages, providing palatable explanations and justifications for ever-shifting economic policies caused much rhetorical hand-wringing amongst CCP theorists—including Mao himself. Questions concerning the extent to which socialist commodities could threaten historical development were especially critical to the understanding of socialism espoused—loudly and repeatedly—during the 1970s. Despite the fact that actual commodities remained, in many cases, remarkably difficult to get one's hands on, discourse pertaining to the problem of the commodity—ostensibly unmasking its form and counteracting its allure—was well-nigh ubiquitous, especially in the winter and spring of 1975. With official efforts to popularize it,

⁶ Akademia nauk SSSR institut ekonomiki, *Politicheskaya Ekonomia: Uchebnik* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1954).

political economy in the Cultural Revolution endeavored to be more than a central pillar of the theory of socialist construction; it also lay claim to the (re)structuring of daily life and revolutionary subjectivities as part of its demystifying and pedagogical mission.

The Paradox of the Socialist Commodity

Insofar as the purpose of (Chinese) socialist political economy was to draw a line between socialist and capitalist commodities, Marx's treatment of the commodity-form and its function under capitalism, articulated in *Capital*, was—unsurprisingly—the discipline's foundational text. Disagreements arose over the origin and continued necessity of commodities under socialism, many of which were rooted in particular political campaigns, like the Great Leap Forward, as we shall see, but the quasi-sacred status of Marx's writings accounts for the overwhelming uniformity in approaches to defining the commodity in the first place. The 1974 *Explanation of Terms in Political Economy* (*Zhengzhi jingjixue mingci jieshi*), for example, includes an entry for “commodity” (*shangpin*) that essentially recapitulates *Capital's* famous opening chapter. Commodities must be consumed by someone other than their producer and must be acquired through exchange. Moreover, that exchange is facilitated on the basis of the commodity-form's dual nature whereby use-value and exchange-value, as a function of labor-time, are brought together, and “[t]hus, as Marx emphasized, a commodity is not a thing, but a kind of social relation amongst people hidden underneath the exterior appearance of a thing (*wu de waihu*).”⁷ This much could be taken for granted; it was the (im)possibility of transplanting commodities out of their ‘native’ capitalist soil without adversely affecting the development of history that created problems. Marx was mum on this issue. Here, one could turn only to Stalin, who remained another major, unifying economic authority in the PRC long after he had lost this position in the Soviet Union.

Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* (*Ekonomicheskie problemy sotsializma v SSSR*) was particularly influential in China throughout the Mao period, especially when it came to explaining the socialist economy's continued reliance on commodities. The first of the work's four short pieces, “Remarks on the Economic Questions Connected with the November 1951 Discussion” (hereafter “Remarks”), made a deep and long-lasting impact throughout the communist world and was constantly invoked.⁸ The eponymous discussion refers to a conference organized by

⁷ *Zhengzhi jingjixue mingci jieshi* 政治经济学名词解释 [Explanation of Terms in Political Economy], ed. Xu He 徐禾 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1974), 46-47.

⁸ The broad influence of “Remarks” is attributable, in part, to its manageable length and categorical language. Stalin is unabashedly direct in expressing his opinions and criticism of others. Comprised of ten discussion points, this is political economy that is easily digestible, unequivocal in its statements, and ideologically unimpeachable by definition, given its source. But it is also the case that “Remarks” provided newly ‘socialist’ countries in both Eastern Europe and Asia with an explanation as to why the

the central Soviet government, attended by hundreds of economists, during which time a draft version of a socialist political economy textbook became a topic of debate. Stalin's "Remarks," distributed to conference participants prior to its publication, elicited responses from a handful of comrades, responses which, judging from the forcefulness of Stalin's corresponding criticism, were very ill advised. Publishing "Remarks," together with Stalin's scathing rebuke of diverging positions, in both the September 1952 issue of the journal *Bolshevik* (*Bol'shevik*) and as a stand-alone volume simultaneously, effectively put an end to the discussion, such as it was.⁹

It is the second of Stalin's ten points, "Commodity Production under Socialism," that is of interest here. In it, Stalin asserts that the Soviet economy fundamentally differed from that which had preceded it—there was neither private ownership nor the selling of labor—and this in turn impacted the nature of commodities in the USSR. "[O]ur commodity production is not of the ordinary type, but is a special kind of commodity production, commodity production without capitalists, which is concerned mainly with the goods of associated socialist producers (the state, the collective farms, the cooperatives), the sphere of action of which is confined to items of personal consumption, which obviously cannot possibly develop into capitalist production, and which, together with its 'money economy,' is designed to serve the development and consolidation of socialist production."¹⁰ Stalin draws a critical distinction here between capitalism and a commodity economy; he conceives of a world in which commodity production takes place outside the purview of capitalists. "Commodity production must not be identified with capitalist production. They are two different things. Capitalist production is the highest form of commodity production."¹¹ The commodity itself predated capitalism and could outlive it in an appropriately socialist way, given the structure of the new economy and its new social relations.

Soviet economy operated the way it did and how these workings jibed with the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. For countries like China, in which the Communist Party was just beginning to grapple with the economic realities of socialist construction, the Soviet Union, which had 'successfully' dealt with these problems since 1917, was essentially constitutive of what socialism was and, therefore, what the future for these other states would necessarily be. If the Soviet economy—with its five-year plans, centralized pricing system, nationalized heavy industry, and collectivized agriculture—amounted, in and of itself, to a roadmap for Chinese development in the early 1950s, "Remarks" worked to clarify that roadmap's theoretical underpinnings, all while justifying some of its idiosyncrasies, including the continued circulation commodities.

⁹ Stalin's pronouncements were quickly translated into the languages of the various Communist states. The Chinese version, which appeared under the title *Sulian shehui-zhuyi jingji wenti*, was released by the Renmin chubanshe (People's Press) less than two months after the text's initial, Russian publication, and the Chinese academic journal *Study* (*Xuexi*) also included the complete text in its November 1952 issue.

¹⁰ Original emphasis. Joseph Stalin, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972), 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

Stalin goes further, however, in responding to advocates of the immediate elimination of commodities in the Soviet Union, by providing not only an account of the socialist commodity's departure from its capitalist predecessor, but also—even more fundamentally—a justification for the commodity's continued existence. As with so many of these discussions, at issue is the interpretation of a passage from Frederick Engels' *Anti-Dübring* and the assertion that commodity production would cease once the means of production were under the proletariat's control.¹² Stalin posits that commodities will wither away when all—not just some—of the means of production are state-owned, but since that has yet to happen in the USSR, commodities continue to circulate. Indeed, they remain necessary because—and this is Stalin's other great contribution to this debate—the Soviet economy comprises two distinct forms of production and ownership.

Today there are two basic forms of socialist production in our country: state, or publicly-owned production, and collective-farm production, which cannot be said to be publicly owned. In state enterprises, the means of production and the product of production are national property. In the collective farm, although the means of production (land, machines) do belong to the state, the product of production is the property of the different collective farms, since the labour, as well as the seed, is their own, while the land, which has been turned over to the collective farms in perpetual tenure, is used by them virtually as their own property, in spite of the fact that they cannot sell, buy, lease or mortgage it.

The effect of this is that the state disposes only of the product of the state enterprises, while the product of the collective farms, being their property, is disposed of only by them. But the collective farms are unwilling to alienate their products except in the form of commodities, in exchange for which they desire to receive the commodities they need. At present the collective farms will not recognize any other economic relation with the town except the commodity relation—exchange through purchase and sale. Because of this, commodity production and trade are as much a necessity with us today as they were, say, thirty years ago, when Lenin spoke of the necessity of developing trade to the utmost.¹³

Once this division was overcome, that is, once the public, i.e. the state, owned all the means and products of production outright, commodities would inevitably wither away, just as Marx and Engels predicted. But in the meantime, the Soviet Union had to deal with the historical realities it inherited in 1917, namely, a small proletariat and

¹² Very few of Marx and Engels' writings offer detailed accounts of the political economy of communism or the transitional period that was to precede it, i.e. socialism. The notable, oft quoted exceptions are Marx's "Critique of the Gotha Programme" and Engels' *Anti-Dübring*, both of which criticize other, nominally socialist theories. For the complete English translation of the latter, see Frederick Engels, *Herr Eugen Dübring's Revolution in Science*, ed. C.P. Dutt, trans. Emile Burns, The Marxist-Leninist Library 1 (London: Lawrence & Wishart Limited, 1936).

¹³ Stalin, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R* 15.

relatively low levels of accumulated capital subject to nationalization by the Soviet state. The result was a (purportedly temporary) reliance on commodities.

This explanation of the commodity's difference under and necessity for the socialist project quickly gained favor in China, where it remained largely unchallenged until Mao's death; indeed, it became a touchstone of Chinese political economy, disseminated alongside and reinforced by the Chairman's own, sporadic pronouncements on the subject. When faced with a similar situation as Stalin had been in "Remarks" — namely, taking on those in his own party advocating the abolishment of commodity production — for example, Mao drew on Soviet precedent. Although he apparently first read Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* in 1953, shortly after its translation into Chinese, it seems to have made little of an impression on Mao upon this initial reading.¹⁴ But he came back to Stalin's text with renewed interest in 1958, pairing it with the aforementioned Soviet textbook, published in the intervening years. The economic landscape facing Mao and the leaders of the CCP had radically shifted by this time, as China found itself in the midst of the ultimately disastrous Great Leap Forward. By this point, the Soviet political economic texts could function as much-needed correctives for what quickly came to be recognized as the "leftist" excesses of the movement. The overzealous, rapid — often forced — establishment of People's Communes (*renmin gongshe*) across the nation and the unmitigated emphasis placed on steel production, even at the expense of quality and agricultural output, had proved to be catastrophic. These policies, originally touted by none other than Mao himself, were implemented in the name of achieving communism as quickly as possible. China was to make a 'great leap' in its historical development by dint of its collective will and labor. Socialism having been achieved, communism was just around the corner, and mass mobilization was the way to hasten its arrival. But almost as soon as it had begun, the Great Leap Forward faltered: padded numbers became the norm, and communalization began moving too quickly for Mao's liking. An adjustment needed to be made within the Party, and — laying the groundwork for similar movements during the Cultural Revolution — it was attempted by promoting and engaging with (Soviet) political economy.

The Socialist Commodity and the Great Leap Forward

Mao's criticism of what eventually became known as the unduly leftist "communist wind" (*gongchan feng*) began as early as the First Zhengzhou Conference, held November 2-10, 1958, only a few short months after the leadership had fully committed themselves to the Great Leap agenda at the August Beidaihe Conference.¹⁵

¹⁴ Xie Chuntao 谢春涛, "Mao Zedong de shehuizhuyi shangpin shengchan sixiang" 毛泽东的社会主义商品生产思想 [Mao Zedong's Thoughts on Commodity Production], *Jiaoxue yu yanjiu* 教学与研究 [Teaching and Research] no. 6 (1993): 66-70.

¹⁵ To be clear, Mao himself still advocated for the necessity and developmental appropriateness of the Great Leap Forward, and he would continue to do so for the next two years. Indeed, Mao's statements during this period are full of mixed messages:

Zhengzhou marked the height of Great Leap utopianism, with ‘radicals’ like Chen Boda, then-editor of *Red Flag*, Mao’s private secretary, and an alternate member of the Politburo,¹⁶ advocating the immediate elimination of commodity production and fiscal accounting. If commodities and money were to disappear under communism and the newly formed communes signified the imminent achievement of this end goal, was it not the time to forego these capitalist holdovers? This suggestion proved to be too much, too fast even for Mao, who made his reservations known, thus kicking off an eight-month period of “cooling off” (*lengjing xialai*).¹⁷ In his talks at the conference, particularly in those given on November 9, Mao repeatedly invoked Stalin’s work on the Soviet economy as a jumping-off point from which to “moderate the leap.”¹⁸ Stalin’s views on the necessity of commodity production and fiscal accounting under socialism served as the theoretical basis and rhetorical background for Mao’s proclamation that:

The people’s communes have to produce socialist commodities suitable for exchange in order to promote the gradual increase of individual wages. As far as the means of subsistence are concerned, socialist commerce has to be developed. Furthermore, making use of the form of the law of value is an instrument of economic accounting during the transitional period, and beneficial for the gradual transition to communism. Present-day economists don’t appreciate economics. [...] Some people in the Soviet Union don’t come out in favor of commodity production, thinking communism has already come, while in fact they are quite far away from it; we’ve been at it for just a few years, so that we are even further away.¹⁹

And again, “[We have to] develop socialist commodity production and commodity exchange. Unequal wages will have to remain for a [while]. We must affirm that socialist commodity production and commodity exchange still have positive uses. [...] We have to expand socialist commodity circulation. At present there is a deviation, as

warnings against leftist tendencies are complemented by similar warnings against veering too far to the right, effectively canceling each other out. Be that as it may, Mao’s early attempts to rein in those in the Party pushing for even more radical upheavals are instructive in so far as they relied on interpretations of Soviet political economic texts, interpretations that would later serve as justification for the dismantling of Great Leap policies between 1960 and 1966 and, in a strange but telling twist of events, the economic reforms of the 1980s.

¹⁶ He would go on to head the Cultural Revolution Small Group in 1966.

¹⁷ For a detailed account of the elite political meetings during this period, see Frederick C Teiwes and Warren Sun, *China’s Road to Disaster: Mao, Central Politicians, and Provincial Leaders in the Unfolding of the Great Leap Forward, 1955-1959* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 119-176.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁹ Mao Zedong, *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao: From the Hundred Flowers to the Great Leap Forward*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar, Timothy Cheek and Eugene Wu, Harvard Contemporary China Series (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies/Harvard University, 1989), 456-457.

if the more communism, the better. Communism has to come step by step. [...] At present a few people persist in wanting to achieve communism in a matter of three to five years. The economists are 'left'; they get by under false pretenses, and thereby expose their vulnerable side."²⁰

Mao made similar comments at the Wuchang Conference in late November, the Sixth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee in early December, the Lushan Conference in July 1959, and again later that year, repeatedly urging cadres to study Stalin's text and, crucially, the monumental *Political Economy: A Textbook* to which it gave rise.²¹ The intention in promoting these works was not the wholesale adoption of the Soviet position; this is, after all, the time during which the Sino-Soviet split began to emerge. Indeed, Mao was quite critical of Stalin in many respects—a fact which arguably undercut the efforts to 'cool down' the Great Leap. At Wuchang, for instance, Mao reaffirmed the importance of study but went against Stalin in suggesting that some means of production (tractors appear to be Mao's favorite example on this front) fell under the category of socialist commodities. Stalin's contention that commodities were limited to the realm of personal consumption was an error, Mao claimed,

²⁰ Ibid., 465.

²¹ At the same time that Mao was holding forth on Stalin and the continued need for commodity production with his colleagues at Zhengzhou in 1958, for example, a letter, dated November 9, entitled "Suggested Reading" (*Guanyu dushu de jianyi*), was disseminated to Party cadres at the central, provincial, prefectural, and county levels, calling for the organized study of political economy in order to clarify the correct, Marxist path forward. "I write to you for one reason only: to suggest that you read two books. One is Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*; the other is *Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin on Communist Society* (*Ma En Lie Si lun gongchanzhuyi shehui*). Everyone should read each volume three times with care, reading and thinking, and analyzing which points are correct (*zhengquede*) (I believe this to be the majority) and which points are not correct or not wholly correct or give a muddled impression of what the author is trying to say. In such cases, he may not be clear on this himself. We must connect these two works to the Chinese socialist economic revolution and economic construction, using them to clear our minds and direct our great economic work. Now there are many people with chaotic thinking (*hunluan sixiang*). Reading these two books may clear things up. There are some comrades, calling themselves Marxist economists, who, in the past few months, are like this. When they read Marxist political economy they are Marxists, but when it comes to the practical questions of current economic practice, their Marxism falls short. This requirement to read and debate will benefit all comrades." Mao ended his missive with a further suggestion: "In the future, you may also read another book: *Textbook on Political Economy*, edited by our Soviet comrades." My translation. Mao Zedong 毛泽东, "Guanyu dushu jianyi" 关于读书建议 [Suggested Reading], in *Mao Zedong du shehuizhuyi zhengzhi jingjixue pizhu he tanhua (jianben)* 毛泽东读社会主义政治经济学批注和谈话 (简本) [Mao Zedong's Notes and Talks on Reading Socialist Political Economy (Abridged)], ed. Deng Liqun 邓力群 (Beijing: Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guoshi xuehui, 1998), 3-6.

corrected in the Soviet textbook's recent third edition.²² The point of engaging with these “manual[s] of Soviet orthodoxy,” then, was simply to air out and circulate Mao's own economic ideas.²³ The works provided a rhetorical opportunity to reorient the Great Leap Forward and achieve a new consensus—ultimately coalescing around Mao's views and not the Soviets'—on matters of political economy.²⁴

In point of fact, of course, these Soviet texts were, in certain circles at least, already quite well known. The Soviet textbook, for one, had made quite a splash in the PRC—as it had across the whole of the Communist world—when it first came out in 1954. Work on the Chinese translation in Beijing began as soon as the original Russian was released and took less than a year to complete. People's Publishing's 677-page *Textbook on Political Economy* (*Zhengzhi jingjixue jiaokeshu*) hit the shelves in June 1955.²⁵ Initial reactions, published in academic journals including *Economic Research* (*Jingji yanjiu*) and *New Construction* (*Xin jianshe*), were overwhelmingly positive. In what amounts to his review of the textbook on the eve of its release, Wang Ya'nan places particular emphasis on the textbook's helpfulness in distinguishing between those aspects of the contemporary economy corresponding to capitalism and those pertaining to socialism.²⁶ For example, drawing on Stalin's earlier statements, Wang makes a distinction between commodity production in general and capitalism as a stage of historical development, thus explaining the fact that some aspects of commodity exchange could be expected to disappear along with the rest of capitalist society, while others would persist into socialism. The key, Wang reminds us, is to be able to tell which aspect belongs to which stage.

When researching socialist political economy, the most difficult thing is to disentangle economic concepts from capitalism...Happily, in his *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*, not only does Stalin instruct us to differentiate

²² Mao, *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao* 494.

²³ Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, Vol. 2: The Great Leap Forward, 1958-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 295.

²⁴ Mao says as much in this statement, made at Wuchang. “We here, me included, have in the past not paid attention to the political economy of socialism, and have not studied the texts, and at present a few hundred thousand people throughout the country are discussing it vigorously; ten different people have ten different theories, one hundred different people have one hundred different theories. It's time to study the text again; those one has not read should be read, and those one has read should be reread; and furthermore [*Textbook on Political Economy*] should be read. Have you done so or not? Everybody should be issued a copy of this textbook. First read the section on socialism[...].” Mao, *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao* 494.

²⁵ *Zhengzhi jingjixue jiaokeshu* 政治经济学教科书 [*Textbook on Political Economy*], ed. Sulian kexueyuan jingji yanjiusuo 苏联科学院经济研究所 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1955).

²⁶ For his part, Wang classifies the economic principles introduced in *Textbook on Political Economy* into four groups: some belong to the capitalist mode of production, some to the socialist mode of production, some are characteristic of all economic activity, and some are specifically connected with commodity production.

the content and character of systems of ownership of the means of production, but also to distinguish the areas in which those systems of ownership can exist and be put to good use, for example, such concepts as commodity production and value. In a socialist society in which the means of production are publicly owned, activities pertaining to commodity production are restricted to goods for personal consumption; and the area in which the law of value is operative is also limited.²⁷

At the time of its publication, the added value of the textbook, above and beyond Stalin's pronouncements on economic issues, stemmed from the amount of detail and guidance it provided for those in the midst of socialist construction.

But whereas the initial interest in the Soviet textbook seems to have been mainly limited to theorists and academics, it was central to the more widespread popularization of political economy characteristic of the Great Leap Forward and prefigured the formula for political economic "study" and "reading" that would later be used in the 1970s. This push was highly regularized. First identified by Mao as suggested reading in late 1958, by the Lushan Conference of July 1959 all cadres above the county secretary level were explicitly required to form small groups devoted to the study of the textbook's section on socialism. As a blanket requirement, it applied to even the highest echelons of the Party. Liu Shaoqi, for example, began conducting his so-called 'Hainan Seminar' in November 1959 during a month's sick leave,²⁸ while Mao himself began his study in Hangzhou on December 10 in the company of his private secretaries Chen Boda and Tian Jiaying, as well as Hu Sheng and Deng Liqun, both involved with *Red Flag* at the time and trusted *xiucai*.²⁹ Mao's small group met six days a week for a few hours in the late afternoon and evening until early 1960, when the participants convened intermittently in Shanghai and Guangzhou. They covered no more than twenty pages of the textbook's section on socialism at a time but still managed to complete their reading by February 9. According to Hu Sheng and Deng Liqun's descriptions of events, Hu and Tian Jiaying would take turns reading portions of the text out loud, which Mao would then comment on, as Deng surreptitiously took notes. These notes were then reproduced and distributed amongst high-level Party

²⁷ My translation. Wang Ya'nán 王亚南, "Zhengzhi jingjixue de jiechu gongxian" 「政治经济学教科书」的杰出贡献 [The Remarkable Contribution of *Textbook on Political Economy*], *Xin jianshe* 新建设 [New Construction] no. 5 (1955): 21-25.

²⁸ For what little is known about the Hainan Seminar, see MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, Vol. 2 293-295.

²⁹ The term '*xiucai*' refers to one who has passed the prefectural imperial service examination, but it was used in this context to denote a "loose category" of "intellectuals with access to Mao. The most important individuals in this group were the Chairman's secretaries and the term was sometimes used as synonymous with them, but others were included who had virtual secretarial status." Teiwes and Sun, *China's Road to Disaster* 123-124n18.

members, at once (re)establishing political economic doctrine and reinforcing prescriptive study methods.³⁰

Prior to Mao's initial comments on the necessity of commodities at the First Zhengzhou Conference in November 1958, the apparent paradox of the socialist commodity had already garnered some interest and genuine debate within academic circles. Indeed, it appears to have been a hot topic in 1957, during which time essays of quite divergent views found their way into major publications. This had come to an end by early 1958, a consequence of the Anti-Rightist Movement, one supposes. In light of Mao's own repeated injunctions to address and analyze the subject, however, a plethora of articles on political economy, with a particular emphasis on the origin and appropriate role of socialist commodities, quickly materialized once again on the pages of China's leading academic journals and newspapers. 1959 witnessed what can only be described as a veritable explosion of writing on the topic, much of it stemming from a conference of economists convened on the subject in Shanghai in April of that year.³¹ In marked contrast to the works on political economy published less than two years earlier, these new texts tended to be much more homogeneous in their approach to understanding the socialist commodity-form. In point of fact, things turned around so quickly in this area that the Economics Research Group at the Chinese Institute of Science (*Zhongguo kexueyuan jingji yanjiusuo*), which had just published a volume of essays on commodities, value, and price in August 1958, was forced, only seventeen months later, to release an additional volume reproducing new materials from November 1958 to April 1959, lest it find itself woefully behind the times.³² If it was a discussion of socialist political economic theory that Mao wanted, he was unquestionably successful in spurring it on.

The notion of a real, substantive 'discussion' in this political climate was actually unfathomable, of course. As with the 1951 'discussion' of the draft textbook

³⁰ See Hu Sheng 胡绳, "Mao Zedong du Sulian *Zhengzhi jingjixue jiaokeshu* de youguan huiyi" 毛泽东读苏联《政治经济学教科书》的有关回忆 [Recollections of Mao Zedong Reading the Soviet Union's *Textbook on Political Economy*], *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu* 中共党史研究 [Journal of Chinese Communist Party History Studies] no. 5 (2002): 8-10, 51.

³¹ For a comprehensive bibliography of such articles appearing in academic, Party, and popular publications from 1950 to 1978, see *Jian guo yilai shehuizhuyi shangpin shengchan he jiazhi guilü lunwen xuan* 建国以来社会主义商品生产和价值规律文选 [Selected Essays on Socialist Commodity Production and the Law of Value since the Founding of the PRC], ed. Zhang Wenmin 张问敏, Zhang Zhuoyuan 张卓元 and Wu Jinglian 吴敬琏 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1979), 1244-1308.

³² *Wo guo jingji xuejie guanyu shehuizhuyi zhiduxia shangpin, jiazhi he jiage wenti lunwen xuanji (Di er ji)* 我国经济学界关于社会主义制度下商品、价值和价格问题论文选集（第二集） [Selected Essays on Commodities, Value, and Price under the Socialist System from the Chinese Field of Economics (Second Collection)], ed. Zhongguo kexueyuan jingji yanjiusuo ziliaoshi 中国科学院经济研究所资料室 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1959).

preceding Stalin's "Remarks," Mao's voice in this newly reinvigorated 'debate' was unquestionably without equal. His pronouncements on economic theory set the ever-shifting boundaries of acceptable discourse, behavior, and policy. With the persecutions of the Anti-Rightist Movement still fresh in everyone's minds,³³ the dangers of overstepping the bounds—those to the right always more treacherous than those to the left, whatever Mao's claims—were keenly felt. It must also be said that the often ambiguous nature of Mao's comments during this period made it exceedingly difficult for both intellectuals and Party members to seek out rhetorical safety.³⁴ With respect to the necessity of commodity production, however, Mao's dicta were categorical, unwavering, and in full accord with Stalin, as was made plain most forcefully in "Record of Talks on Reading Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*" (*Du Sidalin 'Sulian shehuizhuyi jingji wenti' tanhua jilu*), which documents comments Mao likely made at Zhengzhou in early November 1958.³⁵ For example, Mao agreed with Stalin that the peasantry would only accept commodity relations with

³³ Noted economist Gu Zhun (1915-1974), for example, ran into trouble with a 1957 treatise, in which he argued that socialist commodities were a product of accounting practices and that the planned economy could only function by incorporating something uncomfortably close to a market. While he might have been forgiven for the former, the latter proved too difficult to swallow, especially in light of Gu's 'rightist' tendencies in the early 1950s. He was briefly rehabilitated in the early 1960s. For the 'poisonous weed' (*ducao*) in question, see Gu Zhun 顾准, "Shilun shehuizhuyi zhiduxia de shangpin shengchan he jiazhi guilü" 诗论社会主义制度下的商品生产和价值规律 [On Commodity Production and the Law of Value under the Socialist System], *Jingji yanjiu* 经济研究 [Economic Research] no. 3 (1957): 21-53.

³⁴ For instance, in a comment made at Wuchang, Mao argues that communism will take some time to realize—longer than first imagined at the beginning of the Great Leap—but he nonetheless allows for the possibility that the wait will only be some fifteen years. "There was a period when [we] seemed to think that the fewer commodities the better, and the shorter time [they were around] the better, and to the extent that after two or three years they would not be needed anymore. This raises problems. I think that extending the commodity period a bit is better. If one does not need one hundred years, one might still need thirty, or at the minimum there may be fifteen years—what's so harmful about that? The question is, what disadvantages does this have? Does it obstruct economic development or not?" As far as Mao was concerned, the answer was a resounding "not." But the difficulty for those around him lay precisely in determining what Mao meant by "extending the commodity period a bit" (*shangpin shiqi gaojiu yidian*). In mid-1958, fifteen years would have seemed insufficiently ambitious; by November 1958, it had been deemed possible, though difficult; and by the early 1960s, it would have appeared farfetched. Mao, *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao* 493.

³⁵ The exact date of these talks, as opposed to Mao's speeches at the Zhengzhou Conference, which are part of the official record of the proceedings, is unclear. Some reprintings suggest they also took place on November 9-10, that is, during the conference proper. Mao's audience at the time of the talks is unknown.

those outside the collective. To force another set of relations on them would be tantamount to exploitation.

There are some comrades who greatly desire to declare the People's Communes ownership by the whole people. Although they have not come out and said that they wish to expropriate the middle and small producers of the countryside, as have the pitiful Marxists of the Soviet Union, there are some people who say to get rid of commerce (*shangye*) [i.e. buying and selling commodities] and simply allocate goods (*diaobo*) [centrally]. If we were to do this, in reality it would be expropriating the peasants, and it would only please Taiwan.³⁶

Here, suggesting the immediate cessation of commerce and commodity production is equated with counterrevolution and colluding with the enemy. Invoking the wishes of Taiwan, always imagined as a destabilizing saboteur waiting in the wings, renders the position essentially untenable in the PRC. Commodities would come to disappear, just not right now. The time was not yet ripe for it, and until such time as it was, acting precipitously would be counterproductive. Besides, seeing as commodity production under socialism was fundamentally different from what was found under capitalism, Mao averred that socialist commodities need not be avoided. Indeed, quite the opposite: it was necessary to “develop commodity production in the service of socialist construction” (*fazhan shangpin shengchan wei shehuizhuyi jianshe fuwu*).³⁷

Such a statement seems remarkably counterintuitive. How was such a thing even possible? How did commodities become tools of the dictatorship of the proletariat?

³⁶ My translation. Mao Zedong 毛泽东, "Du Sidalin Sulian *shehuizhuyi jingji wenti*" 读斯大林《苏联社会主义经济问题》 [Record of Talks on Reading Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*], in *Mao Zedong du shehuizhuyi zhengzhi jingjixue pizhu he tanhua (jianben)* 毛泽东读社会主义政治经济学批注和谈话（简本） [Mao Zedong's Notes and Talks on Reading Socialist Political Economy (Abridged)], ed. Deng Liqun 邓力群 (Beijing: Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guoshi xuehui, 1998), 20.

³⁷ Mao even went so far in his defense of socialist commodities as to question critics' Marxism: "Now, there are those among us with a great drive to eliminate commodity production. Mention 'commodity production' and they grow concerned, thinking that commodities are capitalist things (*dongxi*). As they push towards communism, these people deviate (*qingxiang*) in not wanting commerce. There are at least several hundred thousand people who believe we don't need commerce. We have some so-called Marxist economists who have shown themselves to be even more 'left,' proposing the immediate elimination of commodity production in favor of the simple allocation of goods. These views are incorrect and go against the principle of objectivity. These people do not distinguish between the essence (*benzhi*) of socialist commodity production and capitalist commodity production. They do not understand the importance of using (*liyong*) commodity production under the socialist system. They do not understand that during this period of socialism, value, price, and money are critical (*jiji zuoyong*) to commodity production and commodity circulation." My translation. Ibid.

Did they not have negative aspects as well? Could they not hurt the socialist enterprise as much as they could help it? Was there a situation in which socialist commodities could, in fact, obstruct economic development? Yes, Mao allowed, commodity production had a downside, but it was controlled (*xianzhi*) and counteracted (*fou ding*) under the current system. “The ‘devil’ (*gui*) of the capitalism of the past has already been exorcised (*yijing chidiaole*). If capitalism’s ‘devil’ reemerges in the future, we will exorcise it again.”³⁸ To fear commodities was pointless; they needed to be put to good use, i.e. “satisfying the needs of society,” as opposed to the accumulation of profit.³⁹ It was precisely the dictatorship of the proletariat that would guarantee that the former remained the goal of socialist commodities and commerce and keep the capitalist devils at bay. Chinese socialist commodities and the Party/state apparatus that kept them in check—the centralized pricing system was understood as particularly important, here—were thereby blessed by no less an authority than Chairman Mao himself.

As was so characteristic with Mao, however, comments intended to move the ‘conversation’ to the right often allowed wiggle room to the left. Such was the case with Mao’s assessment of the capitalist ‘devil’ associated with commodities. While the notion that, should this devil reemerge, it would be vanquished once again was apparently meant to allay nominally leftist fears, by allowing the very possibility of its reemergence, Mao opened the door to the main concern of the Cultural Revolution: revisionism, the backsliding of History. This was Mao’s most significant deviation from the path Stalin had forged in the realm of political economy, and it would have huge consequences. For while the Great Leap Forward was fueled by a preoccupation with hastening the arrival of the communist utopia, by the Cultural Revolution, the more urgent struggle was against those “taking the capitalist road” (*zou zibenzhuyi daolu*), the Liu Shaoqis and Deng Xiaopings who would supposedly undo the progress made under socialism by allowing the devil free reign. By the late 1960s, the questionable and false Marxists were not those advocating the immediate elimination of commodity production—no one, in fact, seems to have seriously entertained that—but rather those who belittled the threat commodities posed and refused to deal with that danger correctly.

The Cultural Revolution and the Threat of the Commodity

This shift in emphasis from utopian longing to unending vigilance finds its apotheosis in the realm of political economy on February 22, 1975 with the Mao quote serving as epigraph to this dissertation: “Right now our country employs a commodity system. The wage system is also unequal; we have an eight-tier wage system and so on. This can only be restrained by the dictatorship of the proletariat. Thus, if Lin Biao and his ilk were to take power, it would be easy for them to bring about a capitalist system. Therefore, we must read Marxist-Leninist books.”⁴⁰ Here, only the dictatorship of the

³⁸ My translation. *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁹ My translation. *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ “Makesi, Engesi, Liening lun wuchanjieji zhuanzheng”, 1.

proletariat can keep commodities in check, and the devil is given a name: Lin Biao, Mao's former righthand man. Killed in a plane crash while attempting to flee with his family to the Soviet Union in 1971, Lin is to the late Cultural Revolution what Liu Shaoqi was to its beginning; indeed, the two figures are often invoked together as emblems of the constant revisionist threat facing the PRC in the mid-1970s. They are reminders that no one's behavior or motivations are above suspicion, with the crucial exception of the Great Helmsman himself. What is especially striking about this particular proclamation, however, is that it gestures towards the economic underpinnings and consequences of Lin Biao's would-be treachery. We are presented with a hypothetical grounded in the continued existence of commodities: "if Lin Biao and his ilk were to take power, it would be easy for them to bring about a capitalist system." The reference to Lin Biao's "ilk," to those equally as nefarious still lurking in the Party ranks, impels us to keep our guard up and question those ascending in power. In 1975, the main target of suspicion was none other than Deng Xiaoping, the architect of the reforms of the 1980s, the theory of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' — which most see as an alibi for capitalism — and the (in)famous dictum "to get rich is glorious." Despite the fact that Deng's political inclinations actually deviated sharply from Lin Biao's, in the topsy turvy world of the Cultural Revolution, the two figures ended up on the same side of the political spectrum in 1975 and 1976, that is, classed as revisionists and capitalist restorationists.

When Deng Xiaoping did indeed take power in 1978, it wasn't long before marketization began to exert more and more influence in the PRC. From this perspective, Mao's comment seems uncommonly prescient. Whether or not the transition to the heavily marketized China of today has been an "easy" one is a matter of opinion, but change has come, by any metric, at a very high price: the shredding of the social safety net, the dismantling of the healthcare system, the irrevocable sully of the environment, staggering income inequality... And so on and so forth. Most would argue that the cost has been worth it; some would suggest otherwise; few would dispute that the revisionism Mao warned against has come to pass — the command economy is no more. What matters to us here is that the threat of revisionism against which the masses were mobilized throughout the Cultural Revolution was understood by 1975 to reside and emanate, in economic terms, in the commodity-form. Without the dictatorship of the proletariat to keep it in check, enacted via the central-planning apparatus, the return of the capitalist devil was seen as inevitable. And yet, getting rid of commodity production altogether was no more viable during the Cultural Revolution than it had been during the Great Leap Forward, the solution to the commodity conundrum proffered in the 1970s being much the same as that advocated in the late 1950s: bureaucratic control, on the one hand, and "read[ing] Marxist-Leninist books," on the other. The big difference now was that commodities, even of the socialist variety, were understood to be infinitely more dangerous — ticking time-bombs of capitalism, just waiting to go off.

This notion was fully articulated a few months after Mao's initial pronouncement on the commodity system of February 1975. The July issue of *Red Flag* included an article outlining the "correct" (*zhengque*) way to deal with commodities in language that would be reproduced over and over again until Mao's death.

After the socialist reform of the ownership of the means of production was basically complete, the capitalist economy became a socialist economy of national investment, and the individualized economy became a collective socialist economy. This was a great leap (*feiyue*) from a system of private ownership to a system of public ownership, a great historical transformation. However, as long as national ownership and collective ownership coexist within socialist society, as long as the economy of national ownership has not fully succeeded in distributing plentiful and varied goods throughout society following the principle of “to each according to his needs,” then we must maintain a commodity system. This kind of commodity system remains a productive terrain for capitalism and the bourgeoisie.⁴¹

The notion that even *this* commodity system—a system that was vaunted as radically different from that found under capitalism—could still undermine the socialist project was a very sobering thought, one regularly expressed using agricultural tropes. The commodity system could—and, if unchecked, would—give rise to revisionism and capitalism just as fertile “soil” or “terrain” (*turang*) would facilitate the growth of (cash) crops.⁴² Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, and (implicitly) Deng Xiaoping were accused of intentionally developing this ability by instituting small-scale economic reforms permitting greater private ownership and exchange. Their goal in advocating such policies was attacked as “using the unfettered expansion of the commodity system and monetized exchange, the development of capitalist factors (*yinsu*), and the cultivation (*peizhi*) of bourgeois elements in order to realize their evil plan (*zuiwu yinmou*) to restore capitalism.”⁴³ Failure to acknowledge the propensity of socialist commodities to foster capitalism under certain circumstances would lead to a loss of vigilance against the notion of “bourgeois right” (*zichanjieji faquan*), and the country would fall prey to the revisionist line, as the Soviet Union had done, according to this view, under Khrushchev and Brezhnev.⁴⁴

In point of fact, this anti-revisionist position did more than take issue with recent trends in the USSR; it diverged from the Soviet theory of the 1950s as well. Stalin, for one, had been adamant that socialist commodities were not harbingers of capitalism’s impending return. “Commodity production leads to capitalism only *if* there is private ownership of the means of production, *if* labour power appears in the market as a commodity which can be bought by the capitalist and exploited in the process of production, and *if*, consequently, the system of exploitation of waged workers by

⁴¹ Zheng Kai 郑凯, "Zhengque renshi woguo de shangpin zhidu" 正确认识我国的商品制度 [Correctly Address China's Commodity System], *Hongqi* 红旗 [Red Flag] no. 7 (1975): 32-36.

⁴² If the commodity system as a whole was understood as the “soil” from which capitalism would (re)emerge, individual commodities were understood to hold the “sprouts (*mengya*) of all the contradictions of capitalist society,” as evidenced by the fact that Marx took the commodity form as the starting point for his analysis of capitalism. *Zhengzhi jingjixue mingci jieshi* 47.

⁴³ Zheng, "Zhengque renshi woguo de shangpin zhidu", 34.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

capitalists exists in the country."⁴⁵ Since the Soviet Union was "a society where private ownership of the means of production, the system of wage labour, and the system of exploitation have long ceased to exist," there was, according to Stalin, no danger of a capitalist renaissance.⁴⁶ As long as commodities circulated within this environment, one particularly circumscribed to personal consumption, they would not hinder the country's progress towards communism. On the contrary, they would hasten its arrival and, therefore, their numbers and availability could be increased without qualm.

The position espoused in the Chinese Cultural Revolution was considerably more complex, despite its continuing reliance on Stalin's explanation of the socialist commodity's origin. This position held that, once the capitalist tendency hidden within socialist commodities was acknowledged, it needed to be struggled against and counteracted. But this did not mean a reduction in commodities; rather, it meant strengthening the power of the economic plan. "There are some who believe that increasing our control of the commodity system means reducing commodity production. This is [...] a mistake. In reality, it is not that we have too many commodities in this country, but that we have too few. We cannot meet the needs of [industrial] production and daily life. From now on, we must develop commodity production according to the socialist path, following Party policy, and under the direction of the leadership and the [economic] plan."⁴⁷ As Mao had indicated in 1958, continued historical progress—or, what amounts to much the same thing, the fight against revisionism—required the increased availability of commodities of daily use in order to meet the ever-growing needs of the populace, despite the fact that the commodity-form itself was a holdover (*yiliu*) from an earlier stage of development. Shortage and scarcity were identified by all as problems that needed to be overcome; the difficulty for those involved in policy decisions, as during the Great Leap Forward, was to ameliorate these issues without allowing capitalism to germinate in the commodity system's fertile soil.

For the average worker, peasant, and soldier, on the other hand, the concern was not balancing economic necessity with the dangers of revisionist "material incentivizing" (*wuzhi ciji*) when taking political action, but in maintaining, and even heightening, vigilance against those who would make (or had already made) a deal with the capitalist devil. It was in this spirit that Mao called on everyone to "read Marxist-Leninist books." Which "Marxist-Leninist books" Mao specifically had in mind is left rather unclear, here, but it took little time for the study of the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, likewise promoted at that time, to take a turn towards the political economic. In April 1975, for example, *Red Flag* published an analysis of the Hunan *huaguxi*⁴⁸ *Delivering Goods on the Road* (*Song buo lushang*) in relation to "the struggle between two kinds of thought on commodity exchange."⁴⁹ Everything became

⁴⁵ Original emphasis. Stalin, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R* 15.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁷ Zheng, "Zhengque renshi woguo de shangpin zhidu", 36.

⁴⁸ A regional opera form.

⁴⁹ Hu Rong 胡容, "Shangpin jiaohuan zhong liang zhong sixiang de douzheng--cong Hunan huaguxi *Songbuo lushang tanqi*" 商品交换中两种思想的斗争——从湖南花鼓

subject to a political economic reading, which then determined whether it was politically acceptable. This was by no means new; it was a staple of CCP rhetoric and criticism, one tool among many with which to declare something beyond the pale. Ideally, however, it was not just the usual Party hacks who would now invoke the vocabulary of political economy. The goal was to promote a political economy “freed from the classroom and reading room, [that] increasingly became a potent weapon in the hands of the broad worker-peasant-soldier [masses].”⁵⁰

How does one go about weaponizing political economy for the lay public? By attributing knowledge of the commodity-form’s inner workings and apparent tendencies with the power to dispel the commodity’s beguiling, revisionist proclivities. In other words, the best way to move history forward towards a commodity-less future was to popularize and scrutinize the ways in which existing commodities were mere manifestations of the social relations of today. The more prominent explanations of the commodity-form became discursively, the less dangerous actually circulating commodities would be.

Political Economy for the Masses

This faith in the power of mass-mobilizing economic theory helps explain the widespread directive—first issued in 1972⁵¹ and reiterated in August 1975—for everyone to “study a little bit of political economy” and the development of instructional materials for that purpose.⁵² Confucius was also attacked in political economic terms during the Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius (*pi Lin pi Kong*) campaign of 1973-4,⁵³ such that, by the closing years of the Cultural Revolution, the populace had already been primed, as it were, for a campaign espousing general political economic education. Even so, the 1975-6 attempt at mass mobilization appears to have been much more prolonged and directed than its predecessors, with its impact clearly reflected in the increased publication of new texts, mostly by Shanghai People’s Press, on political economy targeted towards the broad masses—as opposed to focusing on Party members, as had been done during the Great Leap Forward. One of the most remarkable of these works is Chi Jing’s *A Commodity’s Tale* (*Shangpin zhibu*), a political

戏《送货路上》谈起 [The Struggle between Two Kinds of Thought on Commodity Exchange: A Perspective from the Hunan Huaguxi *Delivering Goods on the Road*], *Hongqi* 红旗 [Red Flag] no. 4 (1975): 67-71.

⁵⁰ Wu Chang 吴畅, "Xue yidian zhengzhi jingjixue" 学一点政治经济学 [Study a Little Bit of Political Economy], *Hongqi* 红旗 [Red Flag] no. 8 (1975): 9-11.

⁵¹ Fang Hai 方海, "Xue yidian zhengzhi jingjixue" 学一点政治经济学 [Study a Little Bit of Political Economy], *Hongqi* 红旗 [Red Flag] no. 7 (1972): 35-42.

⁵² Wu, "Xue yidian zhengzhi jingjixue", 9-11.

⁵³ See, for example, *Kong Qiu jingji sixiang pipan* 孔丘经济思想批判 [A Critique of Confucius' Economic Thought], ed. Beijing daxue jingjixi pipanzu 北京大学经济系批判组 (Beijing: Zhongguo caizheng jingji chubanshe, 1974).

economic history narrated by a commodity, to which I shall return in the following section. Much more common amongst these new materials were short volumes of essays, often written in the model of the 1974 *Political Economy on the Docks* (*Matou shang de zhengzhi jingjixue*), a joint venture of the Fudan University economics department and a worker writing group.⁵⁴ Thus, in 1976, for example, we have *Political Economy in Front of the Smelting Furnace* (*Lianganglu qian de zhengzhi jingjixue*), written by the theory group of the Shanghai Number 5 Steel Factory with the help of the Fudan economics and philosophy departments.⁵⁵

Explicitly pedagogical texts, i.e. textbooks, were also published in large numbers. As early as 1958, plans for a Chinese textbook on political economy were already underway,⁵⁶ though little progress seems to have been made on this project prior to the 1970s, when a portion of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee's writing group got to work on it. Between 1971 and September 1976, the group released five drafts of a tome on political economy rivaling the Soviets. Of these iterations, those published by Shanghai People's Press in 1973 and 1975 as *Fundamentals of Political Economy* (*Zhengzhi jingjixue jichu zhishi*) (hereafter, *Fundamentals*) were the most significant. Importantly, both were intended for the general public as evidenced by their identification as *puyiben*, or, 'popularization volumes.' 1.69 million copies of the 1973 edition were distributed domestically, and translations in Korean and Japanese were also released.⁵⁷ Other publications were likewise targeted to a wide readership—workers from the Shanghai Lightbulb Factory collaborated with Shanghai Normal University on a volume tied to a series on political economy broadcast over Shanghai People's Broadcasting radio, for example,⁵⁸ and People's Press released its own textbook directed specifically at the millions of sent-down youth (*zhishi qingnian*) languishing in the countryside in 1976.⁵⁹ But nothing proved to be quite so influential as *Fundamentals*.

⁵⁴ *Matou shang de zhengzhi jingjixue* 码头上的政治经济学 [Political Economy on the Docks], ed. Shanghai haiwuju yangcunpu zhuangxiezhan gongren xiezuozu 上海海务局杨村浦装卸站工人写作组 and Fudan daxue jingjixi gongnongbing xueyuan 复旦大学经济系工农兵学员 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1974).

⁵⁵ *Lianganglu qian de zhengzhi jingjixue* 炼钢炉前的政治经济学 [Political Economy in Front of the Smelting Furnace], ed. Shang gang wu chang yi chejian gongren lilunzu 上钢五厂一车间工人理论组 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1976).

⁵⁶ "New Political Economy Textbook", *Peking Review* 1, no. 35 (1958): 18.

⁵⁷ *Wenhua da geming" cidian* "文化大革命"词典 [Dictionary of the Cultural Revolution], ed. Chao Feng 巢峰 (Xianggang: Ganglong chubanshe, 1993), 369-370.

⁵⁸ *Xuexi shehuizhuyi zhengzhi jingjixue* 学习社会主义政治经济学 [Study Socialist Political Economy], ed. Shanghai shifan daxue zhengjiao xi 上海师范大学政教系 and Shanghai dengpao chang lilun xiaozu 上海灯泡厂理论小组 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1976).

⁵⁹ *Zhengzhi jingjixue jianghua* (*shehuizhuyi bufen*) 政治经济学讲话 (社会主义部分) [Talks on Political Economy (Socialist Section)], ed. "Zhengzhi jingjixue jianghua

This is partly attributable to the Shanghai textbook's politically powerful backers. The city of Shanghai was recognized as a leftist stronghold throughout the Cultural Revolution. Both Mao and Jiang Qing had found allies there as they began their assault on the Beijing establishment in the mid-1960s. The Shanghai daily newspaper *Wenhui bao* and the propagandist Yao Wenyuan proved crucial to this endeavor. As factional lines emerged in the chaos, Yao was joined by Zhang Chunqiao and Wang Hongwen, also hailing from Shanghai, in forming a clique with Jiang Qing, which became derisively known as the Gang of Four after a critical comment made by Mao in 1974. Yao and Zhang were both personally involved in developing the Shanghai textbook, such that it was closely associated with the Gang. Indeed, after the Gang of Four's arrest on October 6, 1976, which marks the official close of the Cultural Revolution, *Fundamentals* was held up as an example of the Gang's efforts to sabotage the economy. Taking issue with the textbook, therefore, may well have been politically dangerous, thus accounting for its largely uncontested supremacy. It is also the case, however, that *Fundamentals*, being written very much in the shadow of its Soviet counterpart, *Political Economy: A Textbook*, was devised precisely in order to establish a new orthodoxy in political economic theory.⁶⁰

On the one hand, the crafting of *Fundamentals* was clearly patterned on the Soviet textbook's format, but, on the other, it also drew a great deal on Mao's critical musings about the canonical Russian effort. Although Mao's comments—made during his study sessions in the winter of 1959-60—were initially circulated among a relatively small group of Party leaders, their inclusion in the Red Guard collection *Long Live Mao Zedong Thought (Mao Zedong sixiang wansui)*, published in 1967 and again in 1969, effectively made them public.⁶¹ And Mao's critique was decidedly pointed. He was concerned not just with the particulars of its content, but, perhaps more importantly,

(shehuizhuyi bufen)" bianxiezu 《政治经济学讲话（社会主义部分）》编写组, *Zhexue shehui kexue jichu duwu* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1976).

⁶⁰ The origin and structure of the Soviet textbook is worth noting here. Completed in 1954, its preface makes explicit the direct relationship with the 1951 discussion that gave rise to Stalin's "Remarks"; in essence, the textbook was meant to codify Stalin's pronouncements as incontestable, scientific truth. It attempted to do so in three parts, a structure also adopted by the Chinese *Fundamentals*. The first section is dedicated to pre-capitalist modes of production, while the second concerns itself with capitalism. These portions, which comprise nearly half the 638-page tome, break little new theoretical ground, able to rely heavily on the writings of Marx and Engels. The latter half of the book is a different story as it seeks to describe and explain the socialist mode of production in painstaking detail. Here, it relies on the principles outlined by Stalin, extending his logic regarding commodities and their relationship to systems of public ownership to similarly delicate questions concerning the meaning of prices and money (Chapter 31) and workers' wages (Chapter 32) under socialism.

⁶¹ Mao Zedong 毛泽东, "Sulian Zhengzhi jingjixue dushu biji" 苏联《政治经济学》读书笔记 [Reading Notes on the Soviet Union's *Political Economics*], in *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* 毛泽东思想万岁 [Long Live Mao Zedong Thought] (Beijing: n.p., 1969), 319-399.

with its underlying methodology. Indeed, he felt the need to qualify that the work should still be considered Marxist, despite its flaws.⁶² The text itself was deemed “very poorly written, neither persuasive nor interesting to read,” a verdict with which it is difficult to find fault.⁶³ *A Textbook on Political Economy* was not meant, it seems, to be a page-turner. “The book does not deal with problems masterfully, with overall control of its subject. Issues do not stand forth clearly. The composition is not persuasive but is dull and illogical, lacking even formal logic.”⁶⁴ But more to the point, Mao also took issue with the fact that it did not “proceed from concrete analysis of the contradictions between the productive forces and the production relations nor the contradiction between the economic base and the superstructure.” In this respect, the Soviets stood accused of having deviated from Marxist practice; that is, they had written a work that failed in its attempts to be “systematically scientific.”⁶⁵ When it came time for the Chinese to write their own textbook of political economy, it would be best to begin from “the issues and arguments at the core,” as opposed to *a priori* definitions.⁶⁶ More specifically, Mao believed that mimicking the precise structure of Marx’s *Capital* was a mistake.

In researching the capitalist economy Marx, too, studied mainly ownership of the means of production under capitalism, examining how distribution of the means of production determined the distribution of commodities. In capitalist society the social nature of production and the private nature of ownership is a fundamental contradiction. Marx began with the commodity and went on to reveal the relations among people behind commodities. [...] Commodities in socialist society still have duality; nonetheless, thanks to the establishment of public ownership of the means of production and the fact that labor power is no longer a commodity, duality of commodities under socialism is not the same as their duality under capitalism. The relations among people are no longer hidden behind commodity relations. Thus, if socialist economy is studied beginning with the duality of commodities, copying Marx’s method, it may well have the opposite effect of confusing the issues, making things harder for people to understand.

In writing a political economy of our own we could also begin with the ownership system. First, we describe the conversion of ownership of the means of production from private to public: how we converted private ownership of bureaucratic capital and the capitalist ownership system into socialist ownership by the whole people; private ownership of the land by the landlords was turned first into private ownership by individual peasants and then into collective ownership under socialism; only then could we describe the contradiction between the two forms of public ownership under socialism and

⁶² Mao Zedong, *A Critique of Soviet Economics*, trans. Moss Roberts (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 106-107.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

how collective ownership under socialism could make the transition to people's ownership under communism.⁶⁷

The contradictions at the heart of the socialist economy—between classes, the city and the country, the nation and the work unit, heavy industry and light industry, production and consumption, etc.—would take center stage, as we might expect from a Maoist approach.

Mao's comments clearly mapped out China's own response to the Soviet Union's canonization of political economic orthodoxy, and the 1970s *Fundamentals* was duly laid out according to the Chairman's instructions. The socialist commodity therefore makes its appearance in *Fundamentals* rather late (Chapter 19, the seventh chapter of the section on socialism), after the production relations of the system have already been established, within the context of explaining socialist exchange in its varied forms. This introduction is quickly followed by a discussion on the nature of money in the PRC and its importance in facilitating such exchange. Chapter 21 picks up on these themes with a consideration of the socialist distribution principle—from each according to his abilities, to each according to his work (*ge jin sou neng, an lao fen pei*)—and a critique of “bourgeois right” (*zichanjieji faquan*)—the appearance of equality vis-à-vis exchange and money, when the social relations hidden behind them are anything but.⁶⁸ The textbook explained the persistence, necessity, and danger of socialist commodities as part and parcel of the process of continuous revolution, fueled by unending and irresolvable contradictions.

What fundamentally set the socialist economy apart from its capitalist counterpart, then, was not the overcoming of contradiction—that would be anathema to the dialectical approach, after all—but rather, the forthrightness with which contradiction presented itself and was recognized. Thus *Fundamentals'* structure and approach to political economy. But this can be seen elsewhere as well—in the effort to disentangle attributes of one system from another and form (*xingshi*) from essence (*benzhi*), for example. In the latter case, the task of the political economist is primarily one of demystification, and so one notes the emergence of a common theme whereby that which seems to mirror the capitalist system is consistently explained away as deceiving appearance. Any similarities are only superficial, for underneath it all, is a radically different system of public ownership—divided into two types, as Stalin decreed—which consequently alters the theoretical underpinnings of apparently stable categories and concepts, including the notions of ‘money’ and ‘wages.’ Now that private ownership has been abolished, one cannot sell one's labor as a commodity to someone else and, as a result, ‘wages’ cease to be the manifestation of the exchange-value of that labor. They instead become a means of distribution, according to one's work, of assets which the worker as a member of the proletariat always already owns together with her fellow citizens. Exchange requires two distinct (public or private) owners, the argument goes, in order to take place. Property rights must be transferred

⁶⁷ Ibid., 110-111.

⁶⁸ The intervening chapter, Chapter 20, focusing on the relationship between and among the nation (*guojia*), the collective (*jiti*), and the individual (*geren*).

from one entity to another. When this occurs, as when agricultural communes procure goods produced in nationalized factories, the result is commodification in the Stalinist sense. But when we speak of the circulation of goods within an entity—as when nationalized factory workers receive wages from a state which they (nominally) comprise or when commune members receive a portion of their communal farm’s surplus harvest—this does not constitute commodity exchange of the sort seen under capitalism. Wages are thereby separated from the notion of labor-as-commodity. Pricing and, by extension, money are rendered independent of exchange-value in these situations.⁶⁹

The reevaluation of these notions, however, was itself predicated on an understanding of a socialist commodity forged in new relations of production. In *Fundamentals*, these new social relations are expressed most forcefully, perhaps, with the invocation of an unexpected figure:

As the retired dock worker Ma Hongliang sings in the revolutionary Beijing opera *On the Docks (Haigang)*: “In this new society, we dock workers have become the masters and are filled with pride. From birth to old age, in sickness and in death, we have something to rely on. The benevolence (*en*) of the Communist Party and Chairman Mao is vaster than the sky!” These few sentences proclaim the true feelings of the new society’s working class, which has been emancipated. They reflect the great superiority of socialist relations of production.⁷⁰

Why should Ma Hongliang be called upon to testify to changes in the relations of production under socialism in a textbook? A lowly opera character—and not even a protagonist at that—does not seem to belong here. Indeed, more particularly, one might ask why this citation appears in, of all things, a chapter on the socialist distribution of consumer goods (*geren xiaofeipin*). While *On the Docks* is set during the Mao period, one would be hard pressed to argue that commodity consumption is the work’s primary focus. Instead, it emphasizes labor relations and international solidarity amongst the revolutionary working peoples of the world. Counterintuitive as it may seem, however, this emphasis is in fact the key to understanding Ma Hongliang’s unexpected appearance in *Fundamentals*: his primary function in *On the Docks* is to

⁶⁹ This decoupling of price and exchange is also reproduced and guaranteed by the Soviet Union’s centralized pricing mechanism, which, as Janos Kornai repeatedly notes in his monumental *The Socialist System*, is itself insensitive to shifts in supply and demand in an economic system insensitive to changes in price. This aspect of the Soviet Union’s command economy was, of course, adopted throughout the Communist world. Following in the USSR’s footsteps, socialism became synonymous with a monetized economy in which prices were fixed from above. See Kornai, *The Socialist System*.

⁷⁰ My translation. *Zhengzhi jingjixue jichu zhihi* 政治经济学基础知识 [Fundamentals of Political Economy], ed. Zhengzhi jingji xue jichu zhishi bianxiezuzhu 《政治经济学基础知识》编写组, Qingnian zixue congshu (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1975), 423.

educate the younger generation — represented by the figure of Han Xiaoqiang — about the horrors of the pre-revolutionary past, lest those born under the red flag become complacent and lapse into revisionism. Ma sings of past pain such that Han might see how much has changed for those on the docks: the once-denigrated workers are now the masters; the last have become first. Ma is both the product and guarantor of these changes in labor structure and relations of production, precisely the changes upon which Cultural Revolution-era theories of the socialist commodity — and its differentiation from the capitalist commodity — hinged.

But Ma's role as witness to — and manifestation of — socialism's newness is only part of the story. The more crucial point is that he also articulates that newness; he brings production relations to the fore, thereby revealing the commodity's origins. I want to read Ma Hongliang's abrupt entrance into *Fundamentals* as emblematic of what political economy as a discipline was meant to do in the struggle against the danger ascribed to commodities in the Cultural Revolution. While the inner workings of this socialist commodity-form could not, by definition, be stripped of their duality, they could most assuredly be stripped of their mystery. As Mao claims above, "[t]he relations among people are no longer hidden behind commodity relations." The (capitalist) jig was up: the relations among people had changed, relations, moreover, now plainly understood — at least by those who "read Marxist-Leninist books," including *Fundamentals*, as they were told. The implications of this particular instance of demystification-cum-weaponization were great, indeed, for it went at the heart of Marx's analysis of capitalism. In this sense, I am proposing that the production and circulation of socialist political economic texts were themselves a concerted effort to dismantle the commodity fetish.

Narrating (Socialist) Commodity Fetishism

While the commodity form and its dual nature — a combination of use-value and exchange-value — may have been deemed adaptable to the socialist enterprise, commodity fetishism was relegated to the list of problems specifically attending capitalism. Indeed, one could go so far as to argue that the socialist project as I have been describing it relied on somehow solving the fetishistic riddle, namely, on cultivating politically and developmentally appropriate commodity production that made no attempt at masquerading as something else. Not only did socialist commodities spring from a different system of ownership, they also never purported to be anything other than what they were — products of labor. What Marx famously called "the mysterious character of the commodity-form," whereby "the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves," seemingly taking on a life of their own, is now anything but "mysterious;"⁷¹ it is spelled out systematically and repeatedly with the help of works like *Fundamentals*. As a result, the sleight of hand on which commodity fetishism is predicated — the misrecognition attending "material [dinglich] relations

⁷¹ Marx, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret", 164-165.

between persons and social relations between things” — could be averted.⁷² I want to suggest that this was ultimately the great gamble of socialist commodity production as a whole — that is, that socialist commodity consumption could skirt the dangers of commodity fetishism. Weaponizing political economy was to help guarantee that this wager would pay out, that socialist dinette sets (unlike Marx’s famous table in *Capital*) would not be permitted to dance “of [their] own free will.”⁷³

But whereas the structure of the socialist commodity-form was relatively easy to explain — thanks in large part to Stalin — its beguiling nature proved a considerably thornier — and apparently independent — issue. The “magic and necromancy” associated with commodities were uncommonly resilient; consumer delusion (or more charitably, desire) was not so easily wiped away.⁷⁴ In the PRC of the 1970s, in particular, while the commodity system as a whole may have been understood as a necessary and manageable threat to the socialist project, as we have seen, its specific danger inhered, at least in part, from the seductive power of the commodity and monetary exchange, neatly ascribed to “the pernicious influence of commodity fetishism” (*shangpin baiwujiao de liudu*).⁷⁵ Like the ever-looming shadow of revisionism and ‘bourgeois right,’ the pull of the commodity fetish was not set to disappear anytime soon: “Commodity and monetary relations are a necessary kind of social relation, produced during a particular period of human social development. They have not always existed, nor will they always exist. As the proletarian revolution progresses (*shenru*) and the commodity economy disappears, commodity and monetary relations will disappear, and commodity fetishism will also disappear.”⁷⁶ Until such time as this would take place — that is, until the advent of communism — the populace needed a vaccine of sorts against commodity fetishism, a shield with which to fend off the commodity’s tendency to trick and enthrall. Enter political economic pedagogy.

This larger imperative makes Jing Chi’s 1975 *A Commodity’s Tale Shangpin (zishu)* all the more remarkable. In a world where commodities are rigorously disavowed mystical powers, this text gives the commodity voice to narrate political economic development. The Chinese title makes the commodity’s role as narrator explicit in the use of the compound *zishu*, or ‘self-narration.’ While not precisely ‘autobiography’ (*zizhuan*), the *zishu* label emphasizes the extent to which this is a rendering of a commodity ‘in its own words’ — which in turn puts us in something of a pickle: this designation turns on the troublesome conceit that commodities can have their ‘own’ anything, even as the text as a whole is meant to convince the reader of the danger posed by such ideas to the socialist project. And, to complicate matters still further, this particular commodity is nothing if not aware of its readers’ sociopolitical circumstances. Thus the text’s preface:

⁷² Ibid., 166.

⁷³ Ibid., 164.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 169.

⁷⁵ *Zhengque renshi woguo de shangpin zhidu* 正确认识我国的商品制度 [Correctly Understand China's Commodity System] (Beijing: Zhongguo caizheng jingji chubanshe, 1975), 70-71.

⁷⁶ My translation. Ibid., 72.

I'm called a commodity (*shangpin*). We are a huge clan (*jiazu*) with tracks spanning the entire world. Each of you readers interacts with me (*yu wo laiwang*) everyday. Isn't that so? The fish, meat, and vegetables you buy at the market; the rice and flour you buy at the granary; the clothing and accessories you buy at the department store—each and every one is a member of our clan. But it's easy to miss the forest for the trees.⁷⁷ Although you cross paths with me daily, that doesn't necessarily mean you know my lot in life (*shenshi*). Today, all of China is studying the Marxist theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and I have become a topic of discussion. Whether in the study sessions of the work unit and classroom or the leisurely conversations of the street, field, and market, people regularly invoke my name. I take this opportunity to give the reader a little account of my life and engage in some self-dissection (*ziwo jiepou*).⁷⁸

This commodity is going under the knife of historical materialism as part of the larger campaign to study the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, a theory— incidentally—which it whole-heartedly supports. The narrator of *A Commodity's Tale* is a Marxist commodity, both in the sense that the anatomy it describes is consistent with the tenets of Marx and in the sense that it is invested in the success of the socialist project. Indeed, it blithely looks forward to its own demise. “All things (*wanshi wanwu*) in the universe have their own process of emergence, development, and extinction. I am no different. Of course, I am not a fortune teller; I cannot say precisely when I will disappear. But my life's end cannot be altered,”⁷⁹ It cannot be altered because Marx has already foretold it; the die has been cast. “I have already recounted my life experience and actions, and although they say one can only pass judgment once the coffin has been sealed, I do not think that is necessarily the case. Because Marx passed scientific judgment (*dinglun*) on me early on.” In the meantime, “[i]f you want to know more about how Marxism assesses my life, I suggest you study a little bit of Marxist political economy. See you in the midst of production and circulation!”⁸⁰ It is a remarkable send off for a remarkable text, urging the reader to participate in the current campaign, while positing that that narrator's voice firmly belongs in the context of the reader's daily life—a life of production, circulation, and (as the preface clearly implies) consumption. But of course, the existence and place of this voice is also denied at every turn—including by the commodity's own act of ‘self-dissection.’

Indeed, talking commodities and the stories they tell are more generally associated with the unsettling expansion of capitalist consumer culture than with an attempt at this system's de-articulation. A fad for such tales—dubbed ‘it-narratives’ in scholarship on the topic—emerged in late-eighteen-century England, for example, a phenomenon which has garnered increasing critical interest since the early 1990s.

⁷⁷ The original cites a couplet by the Song poet Su Shi (1037-1101), literally rendered: “I cannot know the true face of Mount Lu, for my body is on the mountain.” I have chosen to translate it idiomatically here.

⁷⁸ My translation. Jing Chi 景池, *Shangpin zishu* 商品自述 [A Commodity's Tale] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1975), 1.

⁷⁹ My translation. *Ibid.*, 95.

⁸⁰ My translation. *Ibid.*, 96.

Aileen Douglas's pathbreaking article on the it-narrative set the parameters of the dominant approach to narrating objects/commodities, declaring that "it would be difficult to imagine another literary genre more thoroughly determined by the logic of consumerism."⁸¹ The logic of consumerism, after all, had only recently made its way into every nook and cranny of British society, troubling 'traditional' social structures and mores wherever it went. This meant that the circulating commodity could now claim access to the most intimate of spaces — itself destabilizing for developing notions of privacy, authenticity, and sentiment — and, as a result, was in a position to relay the most well-guarded of secrets. The well-worn guinea or sofa or hackney coach had seen it all — and was now eager to recount its journey. That these discomfiting stories of commodity circulation were themselves circulated in the newly-commodified form of the book has not been lost on scholars of the genre. This additional twist has led some, including Lynn Festa and Jonathan Lamb, to read the English it-narrative fad as symptomatic of shifts in what it meant to be an author and/or to 'own' a text in the late eighteenth century.⁸² Christina Lupton has recently also drawn attention to the importance afforded writers and the medium of paper in it-narratives, highlighting the genre's self-reflective take on its own materiality.⁸³ But even this sophisticated line of inquiry seems predicated on a sense of social disruption left in the commodity's wake. By all accounts, there is something new and troubling going on here. As Douglas puts it, "[t]he very notion that objects have adventures, and that society is integrated through the transmission of objects from hand to hand, is itself a novel way of thinking. The displacement of the human voice in this later eighteenth-century fiction expresses fear and excitement particular to the times. The fear is that people have become enthralled to things and that objects, therefore, can explain society as it really is; the excitement comes from the unfamiliarity and novelty of the society the objects reveal."⁸⁴ For the concerned Marxist bent on demystifying the commodity fetish, the problem is precisely that the excitement seems to inevitably trump the fear.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that Jing Chi's *A Commodity's Tale* is a direct descendent of the eighteenth-century English it-narrative. I wish simply call attention to the fact that in these texts, the object's narratorial voice emerges in response to the bewitching potential of society's consumption. I see a similar move being made in *A Commodity's Tale*, despite its participation in a very different cultural and material environment — at the end of the day, commodities are no less bewitching for being scarce. In fact, the ever-vigilant Chinese consumer in the 1970s was constantly reminded of the opposite: the fewer of them there are, the more powerful their would-be hold over the individuals who made them. This is precisely why, at the end of the

⁸¹ Aileen Douglas, "Britannia's Rule and the It-Narrator", *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 6, no. 1 (1993): 65-82.

⁸² Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-century Britain and France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁸³ See especially Chapter 2 of Christina Lupton, *Knowing Books: The Consciousness of Mediation in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

⁸⁴ Douglas, "Britannia's Rule and the It-Narrator", 71.

day, the form of this work appears so counter-productive, especially since it is not a novelistic exploration, but rather an overtly pedagogical rehashing of political economic history. As we have seen with textbooks, such things were not meant to be overly whimsical or exciting. And yet *A Commodity's Tale* was published by the very same press as *Fundamentals*, in the very same year as the latter's second edition.

The key to understanding the former lies in one crucial way in which it does clearly diverge from the it-narrative of the eighteenth century: Jing Chi gives us an account of the commodity-form, not of a particular object circulating as a commodity. It is not the story of a bicycle or a radio; there are no anecdotes of the crimes of a particular person or family. It is, rather, a tale told by an abstraction, the commodity stripped of any material specificity. Thus the endless slippage in the text between the singular commodity's 'I' and the 'we' of the commodity's 'clan.' Since commodities are exchangeable by definition, the voice of one speaks for all. This level of generalizability is anathema to the classic it-narrative, which follows the thing on its travels as facilitated by commodity exchange, as opposed to the commodity *tout court*. The 'it' in question here is of a somewhat different order, then. Its precursor—and now I *am* making an argument as to generic lineage—is not to be found in Charles Johnstone so much as Karl Marx: "If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values."⁸⁵ Marx's speaking commodity is an abstract form, spouting political economy instead of consumer secrets. Indeed, the only secret it can divulge—in light of its immateriality—is that of its own constitution.

What we find in *A Commodity's Tale*, then, is an attempt to have the commodity speak itself—both in the sense of finding a voice of its 'own' and in the sense of producing itself through words—while nonetheless skirting the dangers of commodity fetishism by dint of abstraction. Just as the socialist economy tries to rid commodity production of its unsavory associations, this text seeks to preclude commodity fetishism by evacuating it of the object: this is commodity fetishism without the fetish.⁸⁶ The great gambit is that what we are left with in the wake of this purge are the social relations once occluded by the material, and these social relations, we are repeatedly told, have irrevocably changed. The new system(s) of ownership have put a putative end to exploitation, for example. The socialist commodity, devoid of materiality with which to hide its now-open secrets, therefore presents itself as an improvement over the capitalist incarnation of the form.

But what this really amounts to is one sleight of hand replacing another: rather than social relations masquerading as thingly relations, we are given abstraction in lieu of specificity and discourse in the place of materiality. This substitution is itself symptomatic of political economy's new weaponized role within the socialist project of the Cultural Revolution, when talking about how commodity fetishism works was supposed to make it go away. That this discourse is itself fetishized, a new form of the

⁸⁵ Marx, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret", 176-177.

⁸⁶ My thanks to Andrew F. Jones for this pithy formulation.

problem rather than its solution, is beyond the realm of possibility for these texts, despite the fact that absolute victory in the war on commodities is necessarily deferred to a communist future. Indeed, the issue as I have discussed it here in my analysis of *A Commodity's Tale* is far too fundamental—try as we might to abstract, we still live in a world of things, of tables with a penchant for dancing. Strictly speaking, this is not so much a problem of commodities as it is of subject formation, language, and things, and as a result, supposed harbingers of the commodity-form's would-be replacement, to which I now turn, were plagued by it as well.

Newborn Socialist Things

By definition, the eventual withering away of the commodity would coincide with communism, but what the communist economy would actually look like was very much an open question. Axiomatically, we know that the distribution of goods under communism was to take the form of 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' and, further, that the public ownership of the means of production—in their entirety, as Stalin had specified—would preclude the possibility of exchange between two independent owners/systems of ownership. The latter accounts for the notion that communism would necessarily be a commodity-free utopia. The ticking time-bombs of capitalist revisionism, i.e. commodities, would be defused once and for all through the elimination of exchange, since exchange-value was constitutive of the commodity-form. Without exchange-value, we are left simply with products of human labor and their attendant use-values. In other words, the pat answer to the question of the commodity's replacement was: the product (*chanpin*). How that would work in actuality was anybody's guess, but, on the other hand, there would be plenty of time to hash out the details before communism was achieved.

After all, there was plenty of work to be done in the study and practice of political economy in the interim. As we have seen, this work included reinventing and demystifying holdovers from the *ancien régime*, which of course included the commodity and its close friend, money. These tasks were undertaken in the name of a transitional period that brought together temporarily necessary vestiges of the past with the inchoate developments of the future. It was the combination of these things that helped define socialism as a liminal age, where the trick was trying to distinguish that which was retrograde—in order to keep it in check—from that which was progressive—in order to encourage its growth. It is here, therefore, that the Cultural Revolution discourse concerning socialist commodities bumps up against that concerning 'old things' (*jiu shiwu*), on the one hand, and 'newborn socialist things' (*shehuizhuyi xinsheng shiwu*), on the other.

The fight against the 'old' has become a critical component of the cultural imagining of the Cultural Revolution, particularly as it relates to the campaign to "smash the Four Olds" (*po sijiu*) at the high tide of Red Guard activity (1966-68). The Four Olds were defined as old customs (*fengsu*), old culture (*wenhua*), old habits (*xiguan*), and old ideas (*sixiang*). It is easy to see why they are typically referred to as a

group, when each 'old' is so difficult to parse and disentangle from the other three remaining terms. The individual concepts may be vague, but in the aggregate, they become all-encompassing. The Four Olds becomes an umbrella term on a par with the equally expansive 'old things,' itself a rhetorical holdover from the late 1950s. Indeed, I would suggest that we consider the two terms as part of the same larger, tempestuous history of negotiation with the past at the heart of socialist construction. For although the notion of the Four Olds may have been short-lived, they, like the 'old things' targeted before and after them, were pitted against 'newborn things' signaling the future in very much the same way.

Before briefly addressing this history, however, I want to take a moment to discuss the word I have translated as 'things,' for one might argue that in linking the Four Olds to 'old things,' I myself am playing fast and loose with materiality. Old ideas seem to operate at a level of remove from material culture in a way that old things do not, for example. It becomes incredibly important, therefore, to distinguish between the use of the term *shiwu*, here rendered 'thing(s),' from the term *dongxi*, which might be translated as 'object(s).' *Shiwu* of both the old and new variety as of at least 1957 typically encompass much more than mere *dongxi*. When I speak of 'things' in this sense, I speak of constellations of objects brought into relation with each other, of institutions produced by and through those objects, and of the social formations they help to construct. In other words, whereas we may distinguish among an object, its production, consumption, and discursive apparatus, to recast that object as a thing, as I am using the term, brings all of these together into a single conceptual entity, comprising both human and non-human actors. Defining the boundaries of a particular thing becomes a matter of scale—of how many connections one wishes to trace.⁸⁷ Thus, a peasant driving a tractor is a thing in this sense, as is a People's Commune. As are, in fact, the 'old ideas' of the Cultural Revolution as evidenced by the fact that the smashing of the Four Olds, as abstract as they may initially appear, in practical terms, meant smashing physical objects, dismantling institutions, and reconfiguring social relations. In theory, at least, the capaciousness of the thing—now so much more than simply an object—unified all these facets of the old under one conceptual roof.

⁸⁷ Note that I am deliberately deploying these terms and concepts in a manner reminiscent of Bruno Latour, leading architect of so-called "actor-network theory" (ANT). Latour has greatly influenced my understanding and theorization of *shiwu* during the socialist period, particularly with regard to thinking about non-human actors. As Latour has indicated in some of his more recent work on ANT, however, he ultimately posits the network as a methodology with which to make sense of the world, rather than as a pre-existing assemblage of humans and non-humans. By contrast, I am making a largely historical argument about *shiwu*, here: the term was consistently used to refer to both objects and the cultural praxis of which they were a part. In order to properly examine the material culture of the Culture Revolution, it is imperative that we recognize the capaciousness of this crucial term. For relevant readings on what ultimately became ANT, see Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-network-theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

The more generalized notion of a dialectic between old and new(born) things as part of historical advancement, while having been current in one way or another for some time, began to gain more traction after Mao's 1957 "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions amongst the People" (*Guanyu zhengque chuli renmin neibu maodun de wenti*). In this canonical text—well known in the Cultural Revolution, to be sure—Mao refers to the agricultural collective explicitly as a 'newborn thing' (*xinsheng shiwu*). He brings up the term twice more when discussing the opposition found between 'poisonous weeds' (*Ducao*) and 'fragrant flowers' (*xianghua*) and the Hundred Flowers Movement (*bai hua yundong*) (1956). Had newborn things been able to emerge in the old society, we are told, they would have been promptly squashed. Under socialism, they must be given support in order to grow and take root and must moreover be defended from the class enemies—at this time dubbed 'rightists'—who would see them crushed under foot.⁸⁸ This call is then taken up in earnest during the years of the Great Leap Forward, further buoyed by the unbridled optimism of the time. Thus, we have Sun Dingguo's essay, initially published by *Guangming Daily* (*Guangming ribao*) in September 1959 and quickly reproduced by Shanghai People's Press, boldly proclaiming that "Newborn things can't be beat" (*xinsheng shiwu shi bu ke zhansheng de*). Echoing Mao's earlier emphasis on the collective, Sun makes a point of touting the recently-formed People's Communes as the most glorious of newborn things to date. But for all his bombastic assurances of victory, Sun also has to strike a more cautionary note: although the new will necessarily win out over the old in the long run, vigilance still needs to be maintained on the day-to-day level.⁸⁹ A good Communist could rejoice in the righteousness of her cause, but there was no room for historical complacency and fatalism.

This tricky two-step—familiar to us from discussions about the socialist commodity as well—remained a staple of discourse pertaining to newborn things when it returned to prominence in the Cultural Revolution. After the official close of the Great Leap Forward in 1960, as Liu Shaoqi's more centrist policies gained a better foothold, the praise of emerging newborn things decreased substantially, only to make a comeback in 1966. Red Guard publications like *Red Guard Report* (*Hongweibing bao*), emanating from Beijing, regularly couched their implied-readers' activities—particularly when it came to the formation of new groups and troupes—in terms of support (*zhichi*) for newborn things as well as an assault on the Four Olds and old things.⁹⁰ The official press also increasingly began using this terminology to refer to

⁸⁸ Mao Zedong 毛泽东, "Guanyu zhengque chuli renmin neibu maodun de wenti" 关于正确处理人民内部矛盾的问题 [On the Correct Handling of Contradictions amongst the People], in *Mao Zedong wenji* 毛泽东文集 [The Collected Works of Mao Zedong], ed. Zhong Gong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi 中共中央文献研究室 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1999), 204-244.

⁸⁹ Sun Dingguo 孙定国, "Xinsheng shiwu shi bu ke zhansheng de" 新生事物是不可战胜的 [Newborn Things Can't Be Beat], *Guangming ribao* 光明日报 [Guangming Daily] September 6, 1959, 5.

⁹⁰ See, for example, "Wuchanjieji wenhua da geming yunyu chu you yi xinsheng shiwu" 无产阶级文化大革命孕育出又一新生事物 [The Great Proletarian Cultural

'advancements' in many areas, including progress made in the arts. It wasn't until the 1970s, however, that official invocations of 'newborn things,' more often than not now appearing with the modifier 'socialist,' grew exponentially. This was especially true of the period between the onset of the Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius Campaign in 1973 and the Gang of Four's arrest in 1976, during which time the most radical elements in the Party were trying to retain and/or regain power. Their chief concern at this time was to promote what had taken place during their often-meteoritic rise in the late 1960s, before the Ninth Party Congress in 1969 and the 'end' then declared to the Cultural Revolution. Thus, in March 1975, *People's Daily* published an article calling on its readers to continue building on recent achievements for the good of the dictatorship of the proletariat:

The process of social development is precisely the process by which newborn things progressively vanquish old things. Our socialist revolution and the victories of our established enterprises are precisely the result of newborn socialist things vanquishing rotten capitalist things. Bourgeois right can only be restricted under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Only in doing so during the lengthy process of socialist revolution can we gradually narrow the three great distinctions [between town and country, industry and agriculture, and mental and physical labor], reduce class difference, and incrementally create the material and spiritual conditions whereby these distinctions can be eliminated completely. Since the dawn of the Cultural Revolution, newborn socialist things have sprung forth in large numbers: cadres, workers, soldiers, peasants, students, and merchants taking the May 7 road [this refers to Mao's May 7 Directive of 1966]; educated youth going up to the mountains and down to the countryside; collectivized healthcare and barefoot doctors; workers, peasants, and soldiers participating in theory groups; and so on. These newborn things represent the inevitable course of historical development and are of deep significance for narrowing the three great distinctions and restricting bourgeois right. Our Great Leader Chairman Mao has always emphasized the importance of newborn socialist things. He has afforded them high praise and given them warm support. Every Party member, cadre, and poor or lower-middle peasant must diligently study Chairman Mao's directives and promote the advancement of newborn things.⁹¹

By the mid 1970s, ironically enough, supporting the newborn things that pointed the way forward to communism looked very much like backtracking to an earlier state of affairs—the implication being that China had been led astray by revisionists (yet

Revolution Spawns Another Newborn Thing] 红卫兵报 [Red Guard Report] November 17, 1966, 1, 4.

⁹¹ My translation. Zhou Peifeng 周佩凤, "Zhichi xinsheng shiwu gonggu wuchan jieji zhuanzheng" 支持新生事物 巩固无产阶级专政 [Support Newborn Things, Strengthen the Dictatorship of the Proletariat], *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 [People's Daily] March 12, 1975, 2.

again!) in the intervening years. It was therefore time to go back to the future — as it were — with the newness of the newborn things the measure of progress.

I want to suggest that it is no accident that the brief history of newborn socialist things I have just outlined in many ways mirrors the history of the socialist commodity discussed in the rest of this chapter. Their stories are rhetorically and conceptually linked, not simply because of their implied developmental dialectic — although that is certainly part of it — but also because they constitute two attempts at grappling with the same problem: how to bridge the gap between material specificity and social relations. The article quoted at length above is a perfect illustration of this. On the one hand, it begins by repeating Mao's declaration concerning the commodity system, made just the previous month, and positions the socialist commodity in opposition to the newborn socialist thing. This was not uncommon. While socialist retailing and commerce may have themselves been hailed as newborn things, made possible by the new ascendancy of the proletariat and their needs and desires,⁹² the socialist commodity per se, as opposed to its exchange and circulation, remained a danger to socialism even as it helped build it. The socialist commodity may have been a critical advance, but it was still not quite new enough. Socialist commodities bespoke the limits of remaking the past — that is, they testified to the need for continuously birthing newness. Thus the need to support ever newer and more up-to-date things.

And yet, on the other hand, while newborn socialist things were theoretically conceived as comprising constellations of objects, people, and practices — of merging the material and the social — one also notes that the newborn things enumerated in the aforementioned *People's Daily* article show little concern for the objects which those newborn things purportedly encompassed at all. As in Jing Chi's *A Commodity's Tale*, materiality has been conveniently jettisoned here, thereby effectively reproducing the very problem it was meant to solve. To the extent that the fear of the commodity's revisionist tendencies was rooted in a suspicion that its particular social relationality — even when altered by revolution and brought out into the open — did not belong where China was headed, the newborn socialist thing could assuage that fear as an articulation of a future-oriented relationality. But in order to serve this purpose, this alternative had to fight discursive fire with fire, and it seems to have done so at the expense of its materiality. In the wake of this large-scale evacuation, it became difficult to imagine concrete new social relations in anything other than the commodity-form — even though this was the whole point — effectively leaving the mechanics of the commodity fetish to work its magic. As this chapter draws to a close, however, I would like to contemplate what it would mean, in fact, to extend the newborn thing's relationality from the social to incorporate the material, as I believe it was originally intended to do and, on rare occasions, succeeded in doing.

⁹² An edited volume conveniently brings together a number of examples of this in one place, though many more can be found in newspaper articles and editorials. See *Zhengque renshi woguo de shangpin zhidu*.

I purpose to do this through a consideration of the *yangbanxi* of the Cultural Revolution as exemplar newborn socialist things. The first reference to the *yangbanxi* repertoire in connection with this category appears to have been made by Qi Benyu in his lengthy remarks, published in *People's Daily*, in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Mao's *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature* (*Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua*). In May 1967, Qi was a prominent figure in Beijing: a member of the Cultural Revolution Small Group, the Central Committee, and the *Red Flag* editorial staff. He made a name for himself with his critiques of historical dramas and films at the start of the Cultural Revolution,⁹³ so it is no great surprise that his essay should appear in the country's most important newspaper on this important occasion. At the end of the piece, Qi begins a brief disquisition on the importance of establishing "models" (*yangban*) of "proletarian newness" (*wuchanjieji zhi xin*) in literature, film, theater, music, dance, and fine art. "The crucial issue in grabbing hold of creation (*chuangzuo*) is to establish outstanding models. The power of models is enormous. Only with models can you persuade (*shuifu*) people, completely cast out old objects (*dongxi*), and forge a forward path for newborn things."⁹⁴ It is precisely at this time that the collective term "*yangbanxi*" entered circulation as shorthand for the five Beijing operas, two ballets, and symphonic work — Qi lists them all by name — that had recently garnered so much attention and praise. 'Models' of appropriate behavior, or *banyang*, had a long history in the PRC, with perhaps the most famous of these figures being the ill-fated Lei Feng,⁹⁵ but the work of art as a *yangban* — a designation previously used in agriculture —⁹⁶ was still unfamiliar enough to prompt Qi's articulation of the model's importance. The *yangbanxi* were themselves emblematic of all that was culturally new in the Cultural Revolution, and they quickly became newborn socialist things *par excellence* as a result.

Given the extent to which newborn socialist things are relationally defined, to conceive of a *yangbanxi* from this vantage point necessarily changes how we approach it analytically. At the end of the day, what is it that we mean when we refer to *The Red Lantern* (*Hong deng ji*)? An opera? A film? A performance? A libretto? A score? We could go on and on. My contention is that, as with the very concept of the newborn socialist thing, we must answer that *The Red Lantern* is, on some level, all of these and more in relation to each other. I take the *yangbanxi* to be a collection of things in this most capacious of definitions. The ramifications of doing so are manifold as will be borne out — I hope — in the many pages to come. But allow me to conclude here by drawing attention to two of the most significant. The first is methodological: if we are

⁹³ He was effectively purged in 1968, ostensibly for being part of a counterrevolutionary clique masquerading as ultra-Leftists.

⁹⁴ My translation. Qi Benyu 戚本禹, "Mao Zhuxi Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua shi wuchanjieji wenhua dajun de jianjun gangling" 毛主席《在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话》是无产阶级文化大军的建军纲领 [Chairman Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature" Is the Founding Principle of the Great Proletarian Culture Army], *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 [People's Daily] May 24, 1967, 4.

⁹⁵ Chinese citizens are still urged to learn from Lei Feng today.

⁹⁶ For a brief history of this term, see Li Mowry, *Yang-pan Hsi - New Theater in China*.

to get at the relationality of the *yangbanxi*, we must extend ourselves beyond the limits of a single medium and speak across and with multiple media in circulation. We must learn to think in constellations, interactions, and subjectivities. This, in turn, allows us to ask a new set of questions about the *yangbanxi*—this is the second major consequence of approaching the *yangbanxi* as newborn socialist things. What kind of relationality between people and objects was being modeled here? How could one partake in it in practice and what did it mean to do so? To what extent did it overlap with and/or constitute an alternative to the (socialist) commodity and its consumption? These are some of the issues addressed in the following chapters.

Chapter 2:
Sounding Revolution: Recorded Sound Technologies, Mass Publicity, and Socialist Domesticity

The Cultural Revolution came. I don't know why, but something about that tempest always makes me think of black vinyl. Times had changed, and this boiled down to my mouth being idle and my ears having hardened. I would shut out the ear-piercing loudspeakers beyond my window, put the volume way down, and play my favorite record.

— Bei Dao¹

The trouble with modernity, Ma Dayou tells us in his contribution to the 1959 *Scientists Discuss the Twenty-First Century* (*Kexuejia tan 21 shiji*), is that it is noisy. For all the wonders of mechanization and industrial production, the din of heavy equipment and transport vehicles leaves much to be desired. Development, in other words, comes at the cost of what we might today call 'noise pollution,' but whereas the emergence of such a concept in America in the early twentieth century was met with a new apparatus of noise abatement,² Ma Dayou imagines a future in which the offensive sounds of modernity become something else entirely. "In the twenty-first century, not only will our factories have been transformed into 'concert halls' (*yinyueting*), but forms of transportation, including trains, buses, ships, and airplanes, will no longer emit monotonous, ear-piercing roars (*housheng*). They will each be able to perform their own marvelous music (*yuequ*). They will make people feel carefree and happy and raise work spirits a hundred fold."³ The drawing accompanying Ma Dayou's essay (Figure 2.1) suggests that the machines of the future would produce recognizable music much as they would produce objects on the assembly line. To be clear, it is not listening that evolves here, but rather, the quality of sound itself, rendered intelligible and therefore — the implication is — pleasing. The definition of music, as opposed to noise, and the desirability of the former are taken very much for granted.⁴

Meanwhile, even as Ma ponders mechanization without unwanted sound, another essay in the same edited volume imagines the construction of a sanctuary capable of blocking out the sonic world beyond its walls, whatever that might be. Cai Jiyuan's idealized home is made entirely of plastics, a family of materials extolled for its durability, weightlessness, and properties of temperature and sound insulation.

¹ My translation. Bei Dao 北島, "Changpian" 唱片 [Records], in *Chengmen kai* 城門開 [The City Gates Open] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2010), 41-42.

² See especially Chapter 4 of Emily Ann Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1953* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

³ My translation. *Kexuejia tan 21 shiji* 科学家谈21世纪 [Scientists Discuss the Twenty-First Century] (Shanghai: Shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1959), 27.

⁴ For Jacques Attali, of course, the naturalization and policing of this distinction is deeply ideological. See Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Theory and history of literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

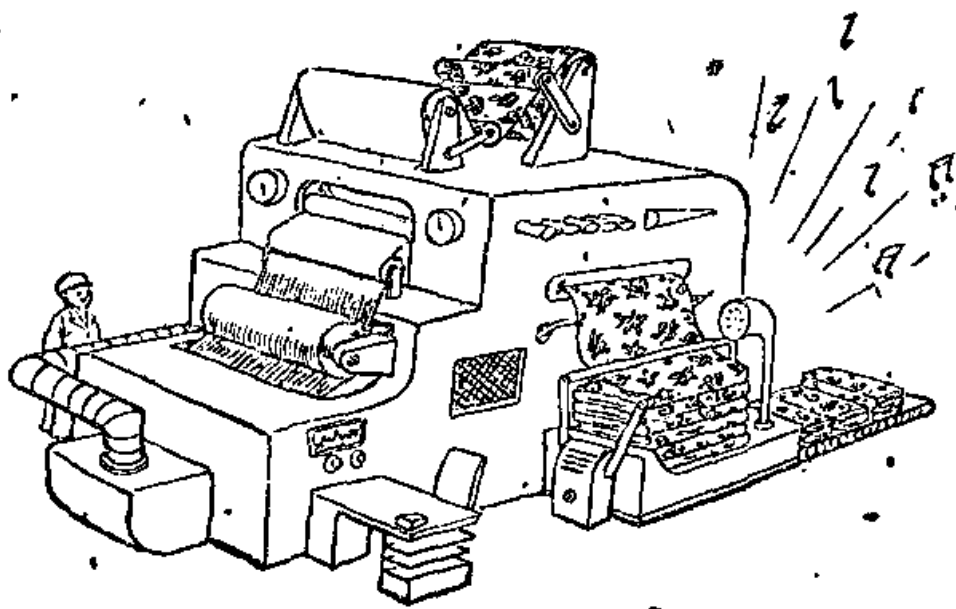


Figure 2.1 Music-making machine of the future. *Kexuejia tan 21 shiji* 科学家谈 21 世纪 [Scientists Discuss the Twenty-First Century] (Shanghai: Shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1959), 27.

Plastic foam is especially promising in this last regard. “It is very good at keeping out sound. When you close the window, the room instantly becomes very quiet. Even if a car goes by outside the window, you cannot hear the sound of its honking horn. This way, you can study calmly and sleep peacefully.”⁵ But, of course, one could just as easily keep out other kinds of unwanted aural stimuli as well, not unlike the poet Bei Dao in this chapter’s epigraph. The plastic home for Cai doubles as plastic bubble, a space immune to everything around it. What is more, this bubble allows for flexibility of movement: plastic would make the Chinese home of the future eminently portable.

A plastic home this light no longer requires a foundation. You can put it wherever you want. You can even have it float on water like a boat. If you’re worried a great wind will blow it away, just tie it down to some posts. When you want to move, just rent a truck and transport the house, together with all its furniture, to destination. During time off, the whole family can move with the house to a beautiful scenic spot and live there for a while, happily passing the days. That’s really what you call “moving house” (*banjia*).⁶

Freedom is found here in a form of atomized flexibility, conceived in relation to the discrete, isolated, and insulated family unit.

⁵ My translation. *Kexuejia tan 21 shiji* 106-107.

⁶ My translation. *Ibid.*, 108.

One could be forgiven for being shocked to find such a notion touted in Mao's China, for this vision of the future seems, on the surface at least, remarkably anti-social for a socialist country. It smacks of a hermetic individualism, when we would expect an emphasis on community and communal space, publicity and the public. Indeed, the scientists' imagined twenty-first century seems particularly out of step with the moment of its conjuring: the Great Leap Forward (1958-60). The communal dining halls and dissolution of private property of the contemporary moment give way to the reconstitution of the nuclear family in the plastified, stand-alone — or float-alone — home of tomorrow. Unexpected as it may be, however, the terms of this fantasy ultimately bespeak the extent to which the quest for Chinese socialist modernity remained bound up with notions of prescriptive domesticity — even when these constructs seem to be most at odds. That is to say, socialist modernity, much like capitalist modernity before and after it, was sought in the idealized home.

This was no less the case during that other great tide of utopian leftist politics — the Cultural Revolution — than during the upheaval and devastation of the Great Leap Forward. I suggest in this chapter that one of the crucial ways in which the socialist home and socialist domesticity were constructed, particularly after 1967, was through sound and recorded sound technologies — chief among them, the record player. There were no portable, plastic houses during the Cultural Revolution, but the impulse to seek refuge from the offending sounds of the outside world — including those officially sanctioned and delivered via ubiquitous loudspeaker — remained. Acting on this impulse often meant closing windows, but also producing one's own insulating bubble of sound, perhaps with the help of vinyl records, polyvinyl chloride (PVC) flexi-discs, and rare, privately-owned turntables. Heir to Ma Dayou's music-making machine, the loudspeaker was critical to the formation of spaces mutually constitutive of such bubbles, or what Hakim Bey might call "Temporary Autonomous Zones." Behind the loudspeaker, however, once again stands the record player. As a result, we must understand grooved plastic as a technology of recorded sound critical to the creation of a complex, Cultural Revolution topography of (aural) consumption on both sides of the ledger: in the interconnected name of revolution as well as domesticity. This chapter considers this topography and the role of the *yangbanxi* in its sounding.

The Loudspeaker and the Acoustics of Mass Publicity

As a repertoire of 'model performances' — of revolutionary Beijing operas, ballets, and symphonic works — the *yangbanxi* initially belonged to the world of the stage and the live concert. In considering the material culture of the *yangbanxi*, then, we would be hard-pressed not to begin with the various, extant recorded formats of such performances. Most people did not have the opportunity to attend full, professional *yangbanxi* stagings. Instead, they went to amateur performances of *yangbanxi* excerpts, performed selected arias themselves, or, beginning in the early 1970s, attended local screenings of the film versions.⁷ The cinema, brought to the

⁷ For much more on the amateur performance movement, see Chapter 4.

countryside by the efforts of mobile film units, proved crucial to the popularization and standardization of the *yangbanxi*, but throughout that process, going to a screening remained an event. Seeing a *yangbanxi* film—even if for the umpteenth time—meant taking a break from the monotony of one’s job, endless political meetings, and the current mass mobilization campaign. It is difficult to argue that *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzi jun*) ballet film was still fresh in 1974, but, as millions of teenage boys, mesmerized by the ballerinas’ short shorts, could attest, both it and film as a quintessentially ‘modern’ technology managed to retain some of their escapist charm. *Yangbanxi* audio recordings, by contrast, were played so often and sounded in so many quotidian spaces as early as 1967 that they became truly enmeshed with the everyday. It is in the context of such aural saturation—the “ear-piercing” squall Bei Dao attempts to shut out in this chapter’s opening—that the *yangbanxi* were most often ‘consumed.’

Nicole Huang has referred to the aural saturation effected during the Cultural Revolution as the “total soundscape of Mao’s China.” Huang adds the modifier ‘total’ to Emily Thompson’s reworking of the term ‘soundscape’⁸ in order to highlight the extent to which “every corner of social life was thoroughly saturated with centrally ordained and politically charged sound bytes. Sounds stemmed from the Centre and radiated to all corners of the society, including those where light failed to penetrate.”⁹ The implication is that sound could access even those spaces not subject to visual surveillance, and while I share Huang’s desire to emphasize the ubiquity and pervasiveness of centralized sound bytes during this time period, I find the invocation of the ‘total’ unsettling. I fear that it lends itself all too easily to a discussion of totalitarian cultural production, to an excavation of “total realism” in sound much as Igor Golomstock has attempted in his study of Nazi, Stalinist, Italian-Fascist, and Maoist art.¹⁰ In other words, it may be tempting to approach the “total soundscape” as a product of a particular sonic—and especially musical—aesthetic. We could posit, in short, not only a Cultural Revolution soundscape, but a particular Cultural Revolution sound. Such a study would assume the existence of sound and/or music as a discrete, analyzable, aesthetic object—and musicology in a vacuum. To be fair, this has not been Huang’s tack, but it is not unfamiliar to scholars of music from this era. Barbara Mittler’s early work as well as Sheila Melvin and Jindong Cai’s *Rhapsody in Red*, for example, consider issues of orchestration, the influence of Soviet composers, the prevalence of “western” instruments and instrumental forms, and the extent to which the revolutionary project builds on earlier discussions of colonialism and modernization in music.¹¹ Lu Guang catalogs the use of ideologically loaded leitmotifs,

⁸ Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity* 1.

⁹ Nicole Huang, “Listening to Films: Politics of the Auditory in 1970s China”, *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 7, no. 3 (2013): 187-206.

¹⁰ Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art: In the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People’s Republic of China* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990).

¹¹ Barbara Mittler, *Dangerous Tunes: The Politics of Chinese Music in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People’s Republic of China Since 1949* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997); Sheila Melvin and Jindong Cai, *Rhapsody in Red: How Classical Music Became Chinese* (New York: Algora, 2004).

like “The Internationale” and “The East Is Red” (*Dongfang hong*) in the *yangbanxi*, and argues that such usage points to an effort to tie the works into a larger system of sonic representation, rooted in repetition.¹² My concern is that these efforts to determine the musical characteristics of a repertoire already presuppose the existence of a coherent aesthetic formulation or project with set ideological associations.¹³

As Brian Currid convincingly argues with regard to the German National Socialist case, this manner of assumption is troublesome, for if a “Nazi sound” can be said to have existed at all, it was made, not given. It was produced over time. The politics of fascism alone did not preordain a particular musical aesthetic, nor can they alone account for the aesthetic tendencies that eventually came about under the Nazi regime. The key for Currid is not only to “concentrate on questions of *what* was listened to; equally important to our analysis of musical mass culture is the study of *how* listening took place.”¹⁴ The way in which music was consumed and the terms in which that consumption was imagined and represented are critical to understanding both the cultural work (popular) music has done and continues to do as well as the meanings music acquires as it circulates. Currid’s own particular interest, of course, is in historicizing the production of Nazi-era “unisonality,” which he approaches as a historically specific, mediated form of what he calls the “acoustics of publicity.”¹⁵ He is interested, in essence, in sound and its involvement in the production of—in his case, national—publics and their attendant qualities, i.e. publicity.

There is ample reason to be wary of relying on scholarship pertaining to Nazi Germany in discussions of New China. Despite some similarities in the apparent aesthetic traits favored by the regimes¹⁶—often lumped together under the banner of ‘totalitarianism’ as indicated above—Hitler’s Germany and Mao’s China differed widely in terms of the availability of radio and other home devices, not to mention differences in expectations as to standards of living and the consumption of (luxury) consumer commodities.¹⁷ These dissimilarities notwithstanding, Currid’s provocative intervention remains instructive with regard to methodology for those of us interested in the popular culture of the Chinese socialist period. It is incumbent upon us not to approach works of cultural production as static, but rather as part and parcel of dynamic social processes. And so it is with the study of media forms as well: we must attend to a given medium’s “forms of address and...structures of publicity,” which are

¹² Guang Lu, “Modern Revolutionary Beijing Opera: Context, Contents, and Conflicts” (Unpublished Dissertation, Kent State University, 1997).

¹³ In the interest of full disclosure, I should say that I myself have fallen into this particular trap in the past.

¹⁴ Brian Currid, *A National Acoustics: Music and Mass Publicity in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ Currid’s notion of “unisonality,” for example, with its emphasis on homophony and what can only be called a penchant for the saccharine and monumental (indeed, some might say kitschy), comes immediately to mind.

¹⁷ That the two regimes considered themselves to be on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum goes without saying.

socially constructed and change over time.¹⁸ Better to speak of sounding the Cultural Revolution, then, rather than of an *a priori* Cultural Revolution sound—a process of making, rather than a ready-made entity.

There is little doubt that the dominant technology in the People's Republic of China's (PRC) soundscape up until Mao's death in 1976 and even beyond was the (mostly wired) loudspeaker system. Even after the transistorization of radios in the 1960s, private radio usage "lagged behind loudspeakers as a form of mass communication." This was partly the result of pricing—household loudspeakers remained cheaper than even transistor radios¹⁹—and partly due to the continued suspicion of individualized listening and the flexibility radios afforded in receiving shortwave foreign or "enemy" broadcasts,²⁰ one of the main reasons given for developing a wired—as opposed to wireless—system on a national scale in the first place in 1955.²¹ It was not until the 1970s that private radio ownership was encouraged by officials,²² and by that point, the ubiquity of the wired loudspeaker network had already been established. Although official statistics cannot be taken at face value, estimates concerning the number of loudspeakers in the network remain instructive insofar as they provide a sense of the scale and pervasiveness of the system. Andrew James Nathan, for example, reports that "by 1974 there were 141 million speakers in use, widely available in cities and reaching into 90 percent of the production brigades and teams and 65 percent of rural households."²³ That amounts to roughly one loudspeaker for every eight people. Even if we assume that these numbers are inflated, they speak to the centrality of loudspeakers within the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) larger project of integrating revolutionary China through sound.²⁴

The loudspeakers themselves were linked to the local broadcast station, which received wireless signals from Central People's Broadcasting Radio (hereafter, Central Radio) (*Zhongyang renmin guangbo diantai*) in Beijing as well as signals from the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁹ Andrew James Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 164.

²⁰ In his essay on radio-listening during the Cultural Revolution, Ah Cheng refers to these broadcasts as *ditai* or "enemy stations." See Ah Cheng 阿城, "Ting ditai" 听敌台 [Listening to Enemy Stations], in *Qishi niandai* 七十年代 [The Seventies], ed. Bei Dao 北岛 and Li Tuo 李陀 (Beijing: San lian shudian, 2009), 147-154.

²¹ Andrew F Jones, "Quotation Songs: Portable Media and the Maoist Pop Song," in *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, ed. Alexander C Cook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 49-50.

²² Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* 164.

²³ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁴ Alan P.L. Liu examines radio, consumed mainly via this wired network, as one of the communication technologies crucial to the integration of the PRC as a nation, as well as the establishment of the CCP's authority after 1949. Alan P.L. Liu, *Communications and National Integration in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 118-129.

provincial capital. These local broadcast stations were typically located in the county seat or, in some cases, in individual factories and production brigades, disseminating one of Central Radio's three feeds through the locality's wired system. Central Radio I and II offered the most extensive daily programming schedules, each coming on the air in the early morning hours (4:00AM and 5:00AM, respectively) with a choral rendition of "The East Is Red" and a preview of the day's upcoming broadcasts. News and cultural programming—presented under the nebulous catch-all "Revolutionary Literature and Art" (*geming wenyi*)—filled the bulk of Central Radio I and II's air time, broken up at various points throughout the day with more specialized programming, including morning calisthenics, children's shows, and broadcasts intended for the military, among other targeted demographics.²⁵

The *yangbanxi* figured prominently among Central Radio's offerings, broadcast under the guise of the more general "Revolutionary Literature and Art" category as well as during time slots afforded for various kinds of drama. But above and beyond this, a significant block of programming was dedicated not just to the airing of *yangbanxi* recordings for entertainment purposes, but also for explicitly pedagogical reasons. According to radio schedules, on any given Sunday in the winter of 1971-72, for example, Central Radio II broadcast a full seven hours devoted to teaching *yangbanxi* arias (*jiao chang geming yangbanxi*). Educational programming of the 'how to' variety became generally more prominent as the Cultural Revolution progressed,²⁶ but even in the context of this overarching trend, the amount of attention afforded the *yangbanxi* is exceptional. The emphasis on *yangbanxi* pedagogy must be understood in light of the broader campaign aimed at the popularization of the works, of which amateur performance was a crucial component. Chapter 4 examines precisely this aspect of the campaign, particularly as it relates to the conceptualization and construction of amateur bodies, but what interests me at the moment is the prescriptive notion of listening implied by such explicitly educational *yangbanxi* programming.

In the spring of 1974, *Sichuan Daily* (*Sichuan ribao*) presented its readers with the supposedly true case of Ma Xiaode as an exemplar of correct behavior. Ma's status as a model learner/amateur performer of the *yangbanxi* derived first and foremost from his skills as a very active listener.

In order to promote the *yangbanxi* well, Ma Xiaode, a member of the third brigade's propaganda team, would spend his free time every day, morning, noon, and night, sitting in front of the radio or broadcast [loudspeaker], singing along word for word or, after watching a *yangbanxi* film, practicing each individual movement. He often practiced until his mouth and tongue were dry

²⁵ For a statistical analysis of radio schedules from 1967 to 1974, see Thomas W. Hoffer and J.D. Rayburn II, "The Broadcast Blitz Against Revisionism: Radio and the Chinese Cultural Revolution", *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (1977): 703-712; See also Liu, *Communications and National Integration in Communist China* 118-129.

²⁶ Hoffer and Rayburn II, "The Broadcast Blitz Against Revisionism: Radio and the Chinese Cultural Revolution", 703-712.

and his waist and legs ached. Sometimes, he would practice late into the night, without any thought of resting. After a period of this kind of diligent study and bitter rehearsal, he was finally able to portray Yang Zirong, Guo Jianguang, Li Yuhe, and other heroic characters quite well, after which he received acclaim from the masses.²⁷

There is little doubt that people in Ma Xiaode's position—a rural brigade member—would have had the opportunity to hear the *yangbanxi* “everyday, morning, noon, and night,” but as a model amateur performer, Ma is called upon to do much more than just hear them. He is impelled to listen in a way that is synonymous with sonic reproduction—this time not in a technological sense, but rather in a bodily one. To listen, here, is ultimately to join in the sounding of revolution, and it is this understanding of listening as (re)productive that is rendered explicit in the educational *yangbanxi* programming—all seven hours of it.

Although the ‘real’ Ma Xiaode was reportedly hard at work in rural Sichuan, the broadcasts he was studiously listening to came from the distant capital. The programs of Central Radio were geared toward a national audience, with local stations essentially functioning as relay posts, which extended the wireless network emanating primarily from Beijing outward throughout the countryside via wired technology. It was also the case, however, that local broadcast stations could, to a certain extent, control local content. In some situations, this might mean translating Central Radio programs into local topolect, thereby overcoming language barriers commonly faced in the countryside, where Mandarin remained unfamiliar, if not incomprehensible, to peasants. In other cases, it permitted the communication of information pertaining to local news and events as well as the broadcasting of live performances by local propaganda troupes—like Ma Xiaode's, perhaps. Areas still relatively far removed from the closest location broadcasting over the wired system also sometimes complemented the sonic network with stand-alone broadcast stations in order to provide more localized information and programming.

Not surprisingly, the control of both types of broadcast stations became very contentious in the factional Red Guard violence of 1967-8, with different groups, each claiming to defend Mao Zedong Thought, fighting over the means of sonic information dissemination.²⁸ After this phase of the Cultural Revolution had passed and order was—albeit tenuously—restored, broadcast stations retained their status as key loci of

²⁷ My translation. Chen Shenqing 陈声庆, "Yanzhe Mao Zhuxi de geming wenyi luxian shengli qianjin-Ji Dengzhan gongshe ge dadui yeyu wenyi xuanchuandui dali puji geming yangbanxi" 沿着毛主席的革命文艺路线胜利前进-记灯盏公社各大队业余文艺宣传队大力普及革命样板戏 [Victoriously Advance Chairman Mao's Revolutionary Line in Literature and Art-On the Energetically Popularization of Yangbanxi by the Dengshan Commune Brigade Amateur Propaganda Teams], *Sichuan ribao* 四川日报 [Sichuan Daily] May 23, 1974, 3.

²⁸ Lu Shuyuan 鲁枢元, "Laba yu shijie" 喇叭与世界 [The Loudspeaker and the World], *Haiyan* 海燕 [Petrel] no. 4 (2006): 48-49.

struggle in the discourse of continuous revolution, if not in reality. In Wang Cuilan's short story "Red Broadcast Station" (*Hongse guangbozhan*), for example, the Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius campaign (*pi Lin pi Kong*) (1973-4) translates into a battle between a twelve-year-old child and a former landlord over local broadcasting. Inspired by the sound of Beijing and the attacks on Lin Biao, the intrepid Tiezhu (literally, "iron pillar") dreams of joining a local voice to that of the far-away capital. Between 1966 and 1969, everyone in Tiezhu's northeastern hamlet installed a loudspeaker in their homes, but they have no broadcast station of their own with which to address local issues. Tiezhu and his friends set out to remedy this situation and establish a small outpost at the foot of the Great Wall from which amplified sound can reach every household. Tiezhu's father, the requisite revolutionary adult of the piece, solemnly warns his son at the outset not to "belittle this broadcast station! Your broadcast station is a dissemination point (*xuanchuanzhan*) for Chairman Mao's revolutionary line. You must earn the praise of all the poor and lower-middle peasants and the fear of every class enemy."²⁹ Tiezhu predictably succeeds in doing just that. He so rattles and angers the evil Zhou Guangfa by involving the latter's granddaughter in the revolutionary enterprise that Zhou is forced to show his true colors: he resorts to sabotage and loosens a stone on the mountain path to the station in an effort to do Tiezhu bodily harm. It doesn't work; Tiezhu is too vigilant to be taken in by such tricks. Instead, he manages to turn the tables on Zhou Guangfa, fooling him into admitting his crimes and getting him arrested.

As we see in this short story, then, the expansion of local broadcast stations, both as part of the wired loudspeaker system and in addition to it, as in the case of Tiezhu, was promoted not just as a way to extend the reach of Central Radio and increase centralization — though that was undoubtedly a prime motivating factor. It was also seen as a way to encourage and carry out class struggle at the local level, that is, as a tool with which to ferret out the enemy hidden amongst the masses. Technologically speaking, this could be achieved with as little by way of equipment as a microphone. An additional amplifier or loudspeaker would be necessary when operating outside the wired system, but these were relatively easy and inexpensive to obtain. The poorest rural communes and communities made do with this and broadcast news and political reports, as Tiezhu does in his village. But many slightly richer localities equipped their stations with "elaborated banks of receivers, recorders, microphones, and amplifiers,"³⁰ often run by sent-down youth (*zhibi qingnian*) with an interest in radio and audio technology.³¹ Most importantly for our purposes, these broadcast stations also typically boasted record players and collections of politically

²⁹ My translation. Wang Cuilan 王翠兰, "Hongse guangbozhan" 红色广播站 [Red Broadcast Station], in *Qing shen ru hai quyij* 情深如海 曲艺集 [Feelings Deep as the Sea: A Collection of Creative Works], ed. Nongcun ban tushu bianxuan xiaozu 农村版图书编选小组 (Beijing: Nongcun duwu chubanshe, 1974), 80.

³⁰ Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* 163.

³¹ The magazine *Radio* (*Wuxiandian*), a publication akin in some ways to *Popular Mechanics*, catered to this group with a section on rural broadcast stations throughout the 1970s.

acceptable records fit to be played for the public over loudspeaker. As with most commodities, work units in both urban and rural areas remained the major purchasers of record players and records throughout the Cultural Revolution. Most people, in fact, had little direct interaction with record players. Instead, when they heard music, including the *yangbanxi*, it typically emanated not from a record player's internal speaker or amplifier, but rather from a loudspeaker at their place of work, on the street, or in their home. In considering the sonic construction of "mass publicity" in Maoist China, therefore, we must begin by examining the modes of address and structures of publicity of the loudspeaker, the means by which sound produced by records and record players was most often heard.

At its most basic, the logic of the loudspeaker is egalitarian. Those within range of the loudspeaker are all subject to the same aural stimuli, regardless of individual choice or social hierarchy. It is, further, a compulsory egalitarianism, in that listeners are unable to affect or modify the sound to which they are exposed. The CCP's use of the loudspeaker emphasized precisely those aspects of the technology that most restricted listener agency. Loudspeakers were most typically fixed to immovable architectural elements, like electrical posts or buildings, high above listeners' heads. The volume could not be adjusted, nor could the loudspeakers be turned off. Finally, it goes without saying that while some of the content played on the loudspeaker network may have been up to the discretion of local work units and brigades, it was most assuredly not up to individual listeners. To the extent that we might think of the music and sound emanating from officially sanctioned loudspeakers as a means of ideological interpolation, the way in which the technology operated—its technologically mediated modes of address—(re)produced and (re)enforced fundamental Communist claims about equality, collectivity, and the integrity of the proletarian masses as a cohesive entity.

It is because of this logic that the loudspeaker might strike us as a perfect aural metonym for totalitarianism: it makes listeners of us all, regardless of our individual wishes. As the sound studies commonplace puts it, though we can close our eyes, we cannot close our ears, and it is precisely this difficulty in keeping sound at bay that the loudspeaker exploits. Moreover, this aspect of the loudspeaker is all the more evident in the wake of new devices—from the Sony Walkman to the iPod—that afford listeners the opportunity to consume 'their own' music regardless of where they happen to be or whom they happen to be with, that is, devices that allow for what Rey Chow has called "miniaturized listening."³² By virtue of its portability and headphones, the Walkman—Chow's paradigmatic technology of this new way to listen—offered perhaps the first of many technological approximations of a would-be "deaf[ness] to the loudspeakers of history":³³ the production of one's 'own' sound world as a tactical

³² "[T]he Walkman provides...the possibility of a barrier, a blockage between 'me' and the world, so that, as in moments of undisturbed sleep, I can disappear as a listener playing music." Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 162-163.

³³ Ibid.

denial of a “hailing” that cannot otherwise be denied.³⁴ Although there were no Walkmans during the Mao era — Sony first released the Walkman in 1979 — the Mao-period soundscape could be navigated and negotiated in similar ways, as we shall see. It would be easy to fall prey, therefore, to a dichotomy whereby relatively cheap transistor radios, for example, allowing clandestine access to foreign stations, are pegged as resistive and take the place of Chow’s Walkmans, fighting the good fight against the sonic totalitarianism made possible by the loudspeaker.

I fear this would be a gross oversimplification, however. The line between hegemony/counterhegemony, politics/pleasure, is not so easily drawn, especially in discussions of — by definition porous and permeable — soundscapes. By positing and seeking out an opposition between what Chow calls the “gigantic history of the public” and “miniaturized music,” we limit the terms of their possible interplay from the outset. Moreover, we risk lapsing into a technologically determinist argument in which the specifications of the loudspeaker necessarily act on by-definition passive listeners, unprotected by headphones or earbuds. The question of mass publicity, from this perspective, would simply be reduced to the logic of the loudspeaker, outlined above, a logic understood to be inescapable and independent of listener agency and social interaction. I would like to suggest something different: The CCP’s investment in and reliance on the loudspeaker network for the dissemination of official discourse, both musical and linguistic, may have been undertaken in the pursuit of forming what Carolyn Birdsall, building on Benedict Anderson, has called an “imagined listening community,”³⁵ but the notion that the Party could unilaterally impose the terms and character of this imagined community, of this particular form of mass publicity, was more fantasy than reality — more goal than *fait accompli*.

This is not to say that the logic and technical constraints of the loudspeaker can be overlooked — they were crucial to the ways in which revolution — and counterrevolution — was sounded. This is true both in terms of the development and shape of the broadcasting network as well as the aesthetics favored in this official sounding. As Andrew F. Jones has recently argued in relation to quotation songs — a popular form in the first few years of the Cultural Revolution in which Chairman Mao’s quotations were set to music — recording practices appear to have taken the specifications of the wired loudspeaker network into account.

The production is perfectly suited to unison singing, melding choral voices and orchestral accompaniment together into a monophonic wall of sound, one pitched high enough and with enough amplitude to penetrate the public spaces in which these songs were usually broadcast on monaural in-line loudspeaker systems. The shrillness of the music, with its tendency to emphasize the frequencies well above the midrange, almost certainly reflects the inability of

³⁴ By the time of Chow’s essay in 1993, the era of the loudspeaker in China was already at an end. Increasingly, the sounds one might strive to keep out were more likely to stem from the din of advertising and construction than uproarious *yangbanxi* numbers.

³⁵ Carolyn Birdsall, *Nazi Soundscapes: Sound, Technology and Urban Space in Germany, 1933-1945* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 104.

compact loudspeakers and megaphones to reproduce low-frequency band with any degree of fidelity. The lack of stereo separation and internal space between the instruments or individual voices is also an artifact of this technology.³⁶

In this way, record production took the sonic limitations of the loudspeaker, the record's primary mode of intended dissemination, into account from the very beginning, such that the loudspeaker network could be put to the most effective use. Insofar as the sonic qualities of quotation songs, despite being a relatively short-lived phenomenon, are indicative of a more generalizable Cultural Revolution proclivity, the technical specifications of loudspeakers go hand in hand with ideological justifications for "monophonic walls of sound." The emphasis on homophonic choral settings of important political texts, for example, is often understood as evoking the unity of the masses exacted by the CCP. In drawing our attention to the technology by which this music was sounded, Jones complicates such (largely semiotic) interpretations of an *a priori* Cultural Revolution sound, much as Currid urges us to do.

In this regard, Jones's observation concerning the spatialized aspect of this music and its dissemination is particularly crucial. Rather than speak of sound's ability to "penetrate" (already existing) space(s), however, I would suggest that sound in fact helped constitute, organize, and define space(s) — both public and not. Like sound itself, the mass publicity which it engenders is spatialized. To the extent that music and sound work to turn groups of listeners into publics — in this case, into 'the masses' — they also locate those publics in space. As a result, it is my contention that part of historicizing particular modes of mass publicity means mapping their most notable sites. Mass publicity, in other words, has a topography.

In approaching this topography, in seeking to delimit the borders of mass publicity, it may be tempting to search for its apparent opposite: individualized privacy. But to do so would be problematic, if only because the notion of 'privacy' is itself largely anachronistic when applied to the Mao period; the notion of 'private' space as desirable belongs to the Reform Era and the 1990s in particular.³⁷ Instead, in the remainder of this chapter, I consider ways in which the spaces of mass publicity, sonically produced and organized by the broadcast network and its millions of loudspeakers, interacted and intersected with a concept not of 'privacy' but of (socialist) 'domesticity,' that is, of what a (non-bourgeois?) 'home' can and should be. It is here that we begin to turn away from a consideration of the loudspeaker to an examination of the record player, for while the latter became a staple of local broadcast stations, producing much of the sound that actually went out over loudspeaker, for most of its history in China, the gramophone or record player was essentially a luxury item reserved for the well-off urbanite. It sounded not revolution, but precisely the bourgeois urge to feather the nest that Communists purportedly found so offensive. In the record player's migration from the bourgeois home to the socialist broadcast station

³⁶ Jones, "Quotation Songs: Portable Media and the Maoist Pop Song", 55.

³⁷ For a discussion of 'privacy' in China in recent decades, see Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life Under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 134-139.

to the agricultural field, I examine the ways in which mass publicity and a nominally 'socialist' domesticity informed one another.

The Record Player and the Problem of Domesticity

Production of records in the PRC during the Cultural Revolution was the sole purview of the China Record Group (*Zhongguo changpian she*), better known since 1985 as the China Record Corporation (*Zhongguo changpian zong gongsi*). China Records traces its roots back to the Great China Record Factory (*Da zhonghua changpiandian*) of Republican Shanghai. With initial financing from Japanese businessmen—a detail conveniently left out of official China Record Corporation histories—obtained by none other than Sun Yat-sen, the proverbial father of the republic, Great China was one of the few relatively successful domestic and explicitly nationalist attempts to compete with 'imperialist' transnationals like Pathé-EMI.³⁸ After Shanghai was 'liberated' by the Communists in May 1949, Great China came under the control of the new municipal government and quickly released seven records of revolutionary songs for radio stations to play on air.³⁹ The Great China Record Factory was then initially renamed the People's Record Factory (*Renmin changpiandian*) and placed under the auspices of the Central Broadcasting Administration (*Zhongyang guangbo shiye ju*). After a series of mergers and short-lived record labels in the early 1950s, all PRC record production was brought under the Shanghai People's Records facility, now dubbed the China Record Factory (*Zhongguo changpiandian*), and the China Records (*Zhongguo changpian*) label in 1955. The overarching China Record Group was officially established in 1958, with its headquarters in Shanghai and subsidiaries in Beijing, Chengdu, and later Guangzhou. The Group brought together every step of the record-making process under one organization, which, as of 1963 and the establishment of the China Record Distribution Company (*Zhongguo changpian faxing gongsi*), included getting the finished product into the hands of (in-country) broadcasters and consumers.⁴⁰ The China Record Group also incorporated record player and needle production and released a line of electric record players, mainly for use in broadcast stations. Beginning in 1964, the most popular of these was the Zhonghua 206, a four-speed record player produced in Shanghai until 1987.

Much of China Records' Cultural Revolution catalogue was devoted to the *yangbanxi*, as we would expect given their political and cultural importance. Each of the model performances was released both on ten-inch microgroove vinyl and on seven-inch flexi-disc—more on this second format later—in two forms: a condensed,

³⁸ For more on Great China and its place within the history of the gramophone in China, see Andrew F Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 65-67.

³⁹ These records are now remembered as New China's first, despite the fact that they predate the official founding of the PRC on October 1, 1949.

⁴⁰ International distribution was handled by the China International Bookstore (*Zhongguo guoji shudian*).

single 'greatest hits' disc, comprising the most famous arias and/or scenes, and a multi-disc set encompassing the work from first note to last. Despite the continued production of multi-speed turntables, these discs were all standard 33 1/3 rpm. In addition to these *yangbanxi* albums, China Records also released recordings of important texts (the so-called *lao san pian* were released in multiple languages, for example), the aforementioned Red Guard quotation songs, new dramatic works, revolutionary songs (*geming gequ*), and exoticized minority musics. The vast majority of these albums were made after the initial unrest of 1966 to 1968, when, like the film and publishing industries, record production saw a resurgence.

Given China Records' relationship with the central broadcasting apparatus, it is perhaps no surprise that the company's target audience for its products was primarily part of the broadcasting network. As I have already mentioned, record players in individual homes were a rarity throughout the Mao period. Like most luxury leisure items, they were in short supply and their cost, when available at all, put them well out of reach of the average urban worker, to say nothing of the average peasant. In the mid-1950s, the sale of record players was under the jurisdiction of the China Department Store Company (*Zhongguo baihuo gongsi*), which categorized them, along with products as varied as waxed paper, harmonicas, ping-pong balls, typewriters, and sewing machines, as *fenpei shangpin* or distributed commodities — that is, commodities whose supply was limited and therefore needed to be centrally controlled.⁴¹ As time went on, a number of record player models, both manually powered and, increasingly, electric, went on the market, including those put out by China Records, but they nonetheless retained their status as high-end, elusive consumer goods. Indeed, in 1967, electric record players were among a number of luxury commodities (including typewriters, furniture, bicycles, loudspeakers, amplifiers, and watches) made off-limits for both work units and individuals without the expressed permission of the local revolutionary committee (*dangdi geming weiyuanhui*) or its military equivalent.⁴² During the Cultural Revolution, then, availability and purchase power were not the only obstacles to acquiring a (new) record player for private use: one also needed the right class background and connections in order to navigate the bureaucratic system.

Relatively rare as they may have been, however, the notion that the record player was a technology to be used primarily in the home had a lengthy, global history. After all, the design of the phonograph as it developed in early-twentieth-century America emphasized the device's role in the domestic sphere by situating it as a piece of furniture that 'belonged' in the well-appointed sitting room.⁴³ In addition to the size,

⁴¹ *Zhongguo baihuo shangye* 中国百货商业 [China's Department Stores], ed. Shangyebu baihuoju 商业部百货局 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1989), 54-57.

⁴² See *Zhongfa* #261, issued August 20, 1967.

⁴³ As Kyle Barnett has noted, in order for the phonograph to gain access to the American home, it had to become more than a novelty: American consumers had to be comfortable with the technology. This comfort appears to have taken the form of furniture, partly as a result of an early connection between phonograph companies and makers of furniture and cabinetry. See Kyle S Barnett, "Furniture Music: The

heft, and shape of their cabinets, which sought to blend with typical living room decors, the phonograph also profited from its apparent resemblance to other technologies that had already made their way into the (western) home: the sewing machine, the music box, and the (player) piano.⁴⁴ In part thanks to these similarities, the phonograph or gramophone became not only an acceptable, but ultimately a very necessary addition to the living space of those of a certain class. “Marketed in China and elsewhere as an indispensable accoutrement of the modern home and a marker of petit bourgeois respectability, the gramophone was both a mechanical emblem of modernity and the principal engine whereby music became an object of private, individualized consumption as opposed to the focus of public gatherings. Indeed, the domesticity of the gramophone is foregrounded in many Chinese print advertisements and calendar posters for gramophones, and is also an important aspect of the discourse on the gramophone and its uses in [Republican Period] magazine articles and consumer guides.”⁴⁵ Literature, too, helped forge this association between the phonograph or gramophone and the domestic, even despite its appearance in other new, public, ‘modern’ spaces like the cinema or the department store,⁴⁶ such that to own a phonograph and later a record player became indexical of a certain lifestyle and its attendant constructions of ‘home.’ In pre-1949 China, the phonograph, first and foremost, ‘belonged’ in the foyer of the well-to-do petty urbanite.

This kind of petit bourgeois domesticity, of course, quickly became a problem after Liberation. Whereas before 1949, they had been promoted as modern and desirable, after the revolution, the trappings of bourgeois domesticity were increasingly couched as dangerous, politically backward, and something to be struggled against.⁴⁷ Policy after policy, campaign after campaign chipped away at the (prescriptive) petit bourgeois notion of ‘home’ as it had developed in the cities during the Republican era. To begin with, the idea of the ‘home’ as a space of (private) frivolous consumption was severely undercut, especially when it came to the consumption of ‘luxury’ leisure items like records and record players. As David Crowley and Susan E. Reid point out in *Pleasures in Socialism*, the very notion that luxury existed under socialism troubles much of the scholarship on life in the Eastern Bloc (and, I would add, in the PRC), but it was also a very destabilizing concept for those attempting to construct socialism in the first place. Accounting for the fact that the socialist economy was deeply invested in commodity production was difficult enough, but an argument was nonetheless cobbled together in which socialist

Phonograph As Furniture, 1900-1930", *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 18, no. 3 (2006): 301-324.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 303.

⁴⁵ Jones, *Yellow Music* 55.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁷ We see a similar situation in Soviet Russia, where *byt*, the material attributes of (petit bourgeois) domesticity and the quotidian, repeatedly became targets of criticism and reform. For discussions of different approaches to Soviet *byt*, see Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Victor Buchli, *An Archeology of Socialism* (Oxford: Berg, 1999); Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*.

commodities were deemed essentially distinct from their capitalist brethren: socialist commodities manifested new social relations of production; they did not mask these relations in a way that led to commodity fetishism; and though they maintained the duality of the capitalist commodity form, what mattered most under socialism was use-value, not exchange value.⁴⁸ Luxury items, however — often referred to derisively as “material incentives” (*wuzhi ciji*) — were available to few by definition and therefore bespoke not just the continued importance of commodities, but of so-called “bourgeois right” (*zichanjièji faquan*) — the appearance of equality as a facade for inequality — the aspect of commodity production feared to be most dangerous during the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, luxury seemed to have uncomfortably close ties to the practices of conspicuous consumption and capitalist accumulation. It inverted the carefully crafted hierarchy: luxury placed a disturbing amount of emphasis on exchange value at the expense of use-value. This is not to say that luxury was absent in the PRC after 1949, quite the opposite. Luxury items continued to be produced and consumed, but on different terms. I shall return to this recasting as it pertains to the record player in a subsequent section. Suffice it to say for the time being that the reinvention of luxury came at the expense of the construction of the ‘home’ as the prime locus of its consumption.

To that end, the pre-revolutionary normative regime of interior decoration came under concerted attack. In the counter-espionage films of the 1950s, for example, domestic space “in the young socialist regime, as exemplified by the worker and spy homes, is a territory whose legitimacy and sustainability depend on its alignment with official and public space. Unity of the young socialist state, both spatially and temporally, is to be defended, reinforced and secured.”⁴⁹ Times had changed. One was no longer called upon to appoint one’s rooms fashionably — or, more precisely, the newly prescribed style shunned ornament and excess; indeed, to decorate for its own sake became the mark of serious political failings. Wallpaper, found only in the best housing, became a mark of questionable political consciousness in light of its association with silver-screen spies. Women, in particular, were called upon to radically change the way in which they ‘made’ the home: no more pretty trinkets on display; no more ruffles and patterned prints; no more worrying over ‘fashionable’ furniture. Thus, in Yang Mo’s wildly popular revolutionary Bildungsroman *Song of Youth* (*Qingchun abige*) of 1958, the heroine Lin Daojing is taken to task for her decorating sensibilities. After spotting “an asparagus fern trailing emerald fronds on the wall and a small, fine antique porcelain vase on the bookcase,” her Communist contact reproaches her: “Comrade Lin, these playthings of the bourgeoisie you have exhibited here do no credit to a revolutionary. A revolutionary fighter of the proletariat sets no store by such trifles because, as the saying goes: ‘Delight in trivialities weakens a man’s will.’”⁵⁰ Instead of taking down the offending items, Daojing does one better

⁴⁸ See Chapter 1.

⁴⁹ Qi Wang, “Those Who Lived in a Wallpapered Home: The Historical Space of the Socialist Chinese Counter-espionage Film”, *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 5, no. 1 (2011): 55-71.

⁵⁰ Yang Mo, *Song of Youth*, trans. Ying Nan (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1978), 214-215.

and leaves her politically hopeless husband along with the improperly furnished apartment. Ideally, women were likewise supposed to break free of the home altogether in order to join the revolutionary work force—toiling in the factories and fields instead of their rooms. To be (merely) a homemaker was the height of decadence.⁵¹ New China needed revolutionary women with revolutionary families living in revolutionarily-run homes—clean, hygienic, egalitarian,⁵² and sparsely furnished.

The increasing importance of not only the Party, but the work unit in the structure and organization of everyday life, including (at times coerced) participation in mass activities—like collective listening to and discussion of radio broadcasts, for example—also had a considerable impact on one’s living space. In the cities, it was ultimately the work unit that was responsible for the distribution of accommodations, with 95% of rental housing and city land nationalized by 1956.⁵³ Having a claim to one’s ‘own’ urban home in the sense of private ownership was exceedingly rare. Moreover, the work unit began to usurp the position of the clan or extended family as the key structure around which residential space was organized. The ‘traditional,’ walled family compound—most closely associated with Beijing, but prevalent elsewhere as well—became the work unit compound.⁵⁴ This in turn meant that one’s neighbors were also likely one’s colleagues, and since compounds did not lend themselves well to privacy to begin with, the work unit could play a central role in the exercise of discipline and surveillance. Living spaces remained all too permeable and accessible to prying eyes and ears—with potentially dire consequences.

The Great Leap Forward (1958-60) marks one of the most concerted and explicit attacks on bourgeois domesticity. Communal dining, for example, pushed individuals out of their homes and into canteens, thereby undermining familial

⁵¹ A number of contributors to the edited volume *Some of Us* write of their childhood disdain for their stay-at-home mothers, women who cannot seem to fit the revolutionary mold. Within this context, *funü* or ‘woman’ was itself considered by many a derogatory term because of its association with bourgeois homemaking. See especially Wang Zheng’s chapter in *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era*, ed. Xueping Zhong, Wang Zheng and Bai Di (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

⁵² In theory, housework was to be divided evenly between men and women.

⁵³ David Fraser, "Inventing Oasis: Luxury Housing Advertisements and Reconfiguring Domestic Space in Shanghai," in *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, ed. Deborah Davis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. 26-54), 31. For more on Mao-era housing policies and the impact of the reforms in this area, see Xiangming Chen and Xiaoyuan Gao, "Urban Economic Reform and Public-Housing Investment in China", *Urban Affairs Review* 29, no. 1 (1993): 117-145; Richard Kirkby, "China," in *Housing Policies in the Socialist Third World*, ed. Kosta Mathéy (München: Profil Verlag, 1990), 287-313.

⁵⁴ For much more on the relationship between architecture and the work unit, see Michael Dutton, *Streetlife: China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 192-237.

practices tied to the preparation and consumption of food, practices heretofore central to the production of (bourgeois) domestic space as such. But in many ways, the Great Leap Forward proved to be a short-lived siege on the home, as its policies, increasingly understood to have caused a truly horrific famine and wreaked havoc on the economy, were largely reversed in the early 1960s. The great push towards communism and its consequent assault on bourgeois domesticity were arguably so extreme during the Great Leap as to be aberrant.

In contrast, the Cultural Revolution approach to the home did not explicitly call for the eradication of the family unit and its living space, as the Great Leap Forward had done. Instead, the purported autonomy of would-be bourgeois domesticity was undercut in more subtle – and likely, ultimately more effective – ways. In the early years of the Cultural Revolution, the threat of having one’s home searched (*chaojia*) by Red Guards, especially in the cities, essentially rendered the space accessible to an outside, revolutionary power and gaze. Much like Bentham's Panopticon, in which the threat of surveillance, the possibility that prisoners are being watched by the guards at any given moment, is sufficient to impact behavior,⁵⁵ the possibility that Red Guards would storm into an individual’s rooms and riffle through her belongings was often enough for her to hide, deface, and/or preemptively destroy potentially incriminating possessions.⁵⁶ In other words, the threat of search and seizure altered the ways in which individuals related to the objects in their homes – certain objects, including records and record players, could be very dangerous, indeed – and, therefore, their understanding and production of domesticity.

The (nuclear) family unit itself also came under attack, as individuals were called upon to “draw a line” between themselves and relatives with political problems, on the one hand, and were scattered throughout the country, on the other. As Susan Glosser has shown, after 1949, PRC officials built on a conception of the *xiao jiating* (literally, ‘small family’) first advocated by intellectuals associated with the New Culture Movement of the 1910s. This notion was rooted in “the Western conjugal family ideal [...] an ideal that promoted free marriage choice, companionate marriage, and economic and emotional independence from the family (*da jiazhu*, literally the ‘large family’).”⁵⁷ By the 1970s, with concerns about overpopulation on the rise, the desirable familial unit narrowed further to “a nuclear family of father, mother, and two children, preferably a boy and a girl.”⁵⁸ Idealized as such a grouping may have been in the images of the day, however, it was often difficult for a family of this sort to stay

⁵⁵ For Foucault’s classic take on the Panopticon, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 195-229.

⁵⁶ Jie Li gives the example of her grandfather, who, afraid that his home would be searched, preemptively x-ed out his own university diploma rather than throw it away. The Red Guards never came. Jie Li, *Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life*, Global Chinese Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 115.

⁵⁷ Susan L Glosser, *Saving the Nation: Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915-1953* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3.

⁵⁸ Nicole Huang, "Locating Family Portraits: Everyday Images From 1970s China", *positions* 18, no. 3 (2010): 671-693.

together under one roof in the Cultural Revolution. In the most innocuous circumstances, adults might be called upon to move into work unit dormitories, leaving spouses and children behind. But those finding themselves targets of revolutionary struggle were subject to incarceration in makeshift “ox sheds” (*niupeng*) and/or relocation to forced labor camps or May 7 Cadre Schools. Beginning in late 1968, teenage children from China's urban centers were sent to the countryside in droves. These sent-down youth found themselves “learning from the poor and lower-middle peasants” (*xiang pin xiazhongnong xuexi*) in the most far-flung places China had to offer. As a result, it was not uncommon for families to remain fragmented for years.⁵⁹

Sonically, of course, the wired loudspeaker system would seem to have participated in the attack on (bourgeois) domesticity at a sensory level. The “monophonic wall of sound” that Jones ascribes to the loudspeaker had a decided advantage over actual, structural walls in that sounds produced and diffused in nominally ‘public’ spaces like the street could impinge upon the space of the home. In his “acoustemology” of a Scottish hospital, Tom Rice theorizes an aural equivalent to Bentham’s (and Foucault’s) Panopticon of visual surveillance, which speaks to this point. A “Panaudicon,” Rice argues, is “an acoustics of power which, unlike the Orwellian notion of the ‘never-sleeping ear,’ is not manifested in the possibility of being heard by a listening presence, but in hearing an authoritarian presence. The Panaudicon operates actively through the subtle infiltration of sound into the patient’s awareness. The patient becomes the bearer of a receptive ear of power, as well as the object of an active eye of power.”⁶⁰ Like the patient on the ward, the revolutionary subject is formed—and forms herself—as a “receptive ear of power” outside the home and increasingly within it. With the expansion of the loudspeaker network after 1967, it became more and more common, especially in the countryside, for loudspeakers to actually be installed inside individual households. As I have already mentioned, such loudspeakers remained more affordable than even transistor radios, and in many cases, the former usurped the role of the latter within the domestic sphere. To the extent that loudspeakers were both constitutive and emblematic of mass publicity during the Cultural Revolution, the expansion of loudspeakers within the home itself might well be interpreted as the *de facto* victory of publicity over domesticity.

I would suggest a more complex, alternative interpretation of this phenomenon, however. As I have argued above in relation to mass publicity, the spatial dimension of sound and listening is not a question of penetration so much as the (re)production and (re)organization of space(s), but that does not mean that the loudspeaker's contribution to the production of spaces of mass publicity must necessarily duplicate itself in the context of the home. What I would like to argue, instead, is that while the inclusion of the loudspeaker in one's home must impact notions of what a ‘home’ can and should be, the reverse is also true: the cultural meaning(s) ascribed to the

⁵⁹ Consider the ritualistic and quasi-talismanic importance of family portraiture as a photographic genre under these circumstances. This is a recurring theme in the pages of the magazine *Old Photographs* (*Lao zhaopian*). See also *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Tom Rice, “Soundselves: An Acoustemology of Sound and Self in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary”, *Anthropology Today* 19, no. 4 (2003): 4-9.

loudspeaker must necessarily change as well. Despite the apparent ease with which we might associate loudspeakers with a totalitarian Panaudicon — and there is admittedly good reason to do so — at the time, they were cast not as oppressive, sonic intruders, but welcome conduits for the quasi-sacred voice of Mao and his many supporters. Thus, we find a poem entitled “The Golden Loudspeaker” included in a collection of children’s poetry by the same name in celebration of the socialist quotidian.

One tree, three forked branches,
On one fork a flower.
What flower? A golden loudspeaker,
Inside the loudspeaker are words.

The golden loudspeaker has a great voice,
Every commune, every brigade loves it.
Golden loudspeaker, what are you saying?
The spirit of Dazhai spreads throughout the world.⁶¹

For a loudspeaker to become the stuff of (officially endorsed) nursery rhymes and to be transformed into cherished flowers may strike us as hollow and forced — perhaps it is. But it is also noteworthy that the primary goal of the poem, insofar as it is engaged in an act of political persuasion, is not to promote the acceptance of loudspeakers hidden in trees (or placed in homes). It is more concerned with touting the Dazhai spirit (*Dazhai jingshen*), as evidenced by the last line. Indeed, the effectiveness of this message is predicated on a preexisting admiration for the loudspeaker and its “great voice.” Acceptance and “love” of loudspeakers is already assumed; it is what makes the poem ‘go.’ To the extent that this is the case, the loudspeaker in the tree is not some imposing instrument of impersonal mass publicity bent on destroying the sanctity of the home. It comes instead to ‘mean’ something else, to resonate affectively with the known, the safe, the comfortable, and this should not be dismissed out of hand. The loudspeaker itself, in a sense, becomes domesticated.

My ultimate point, here, is that notions of mass publicity and domesticity need not be mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they are in fact constituted in relation to and inform one another. Any notion of home involves always-contested distinctions between inside and outside, us and them, local and national, national and global, and so on and so forth. Bourgeois domesticity could not exist in isolation, despite claims of individualized, sovereign space; it, too, is laden with an ethics and a politics whose implications extend far beyond the confines of the wallpapered living room. The quotidian is never *beyond* ideology, whether it be under (late) capitalism or socialism. The presence of the loudspeaker in the home is not indicative of the death of domesticity *tout court* at the hands of Cultural Revolution mass publicity — we know that people still managed to cobble together a sense of home within the bounds of

⁶¹ Li Xin 李辛, “Jin laba” 金喇叭 [The Golden Loudspeaker], in *Jin laba ertong shige xuan* 金喇叭 儿童诗歌选 [The Golden Loudspeaker: Selected Children's Poems] (Hefei: Anhui renmin chubanshe, 1975), 51.

political acceptability.⁶² Rather, the question becomes: what kind of domesticity is made possible by and with the presence of the loudspeaker (and marked absence of the record player), and how might that in turn impact our understanding of the kind of mass publicity we have already begun to articulate above?

The modern bourgeois home, as we have seen, is constituted as such in part by media technologies, including those capable of reproducing recorded sound. It is “a phantasmagoric place, to the extent that electronic media of various kinds allow the radical intrusion of distant events into the space of domesticity,”⁶³ and it is therefore irrevocably tied to that which lies beyond itself. We could say much the same thing about the Cultural Revolution home in this regard. Thus, in her analysis of so-called “sun-facing courtyards” (*xiangyang yuan*) in the waning years of the Cultural Revolution, Nicole Huang traces a prehistory of the television, predating widespread private ownership, and discusses a short story in which “the community has been given just the right kind of technology to bring everyone and everything together. A new communal space is immediately forged around the magic box.”⁶⁴ Here, the courtyard becomes an extension of the space allotted to the residents of the compound. It is communal, of course, but space need not be restricted to an individual in order to be considered domestic — after all, the fount of bourgeois domesticity, the living room, is itself a communal (familial) space. Domesticity and privacy must not be conflated; the latter is merely one attribute of some forms of the former. Rather, domesticity — the social construction of ‘home’ — at its root, is a mode of “organization of space over time,”⁶⁵ and few things organize space over time more effectively, as Huang implies, than the “magic boxes” of the modern media. The radio, the loudspeaker, the record player: these technologies forge communal spaces as well, including those that, given the apparent antipathy towards bourgeois domesticity throughout the Mao period, were nonetheless crucial to the continued development of an alternative sense of home, that is, to the production of an appropriately socialist domesticity and a home that was made to sound revolution whether one wanted it to or not.

Consuming (Counter)revolution

There is no shortage of images of people gathered around a “magic box” during the Cultural Revolution or the Mao period, more broadly. Scenes of families in sparsely decorated houses sitting around radios and loudspeakers are quite commonly found on the pages of publications like *People’s Pictorial* (*Renmin huabao*) and *Minority Pictorial* (*Minzu huabao*). As these official organs particularly sought to promote the modernization of the hinterland and its peoples as proof of the CCP’s power and beneficence, photographs of minorities listening to the politically correct sound of the

⁶² Jie Li discusses this process as a mode “bricolage.” Li, *Shanghai Homes* 135-140.

⁶³ David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 9.

⁶⁴ Huang, “Sun-facing Courtyards”, 179.

⁶⁵ Morley, *Home Territories* 16.

center while dressed in ‘traditional’ garb became very popular. Such photographs proclaim the participation of recorded sound technologies in the production of what Ralph Litzinger has called the “developmental double bind” of minority groups in the PRC:⁶⁶ these groups “experience a contradiction between modernization goals and the expectation that they maintain traditional identities as a basis for incorporation into the Chinese nation.”⁶⁷ The result is a profusion of always-ongoing “civilizing processes,” in Sara Friedman’s words, and the juxtaposition of the “magic box” as avatar of modernity and the by-definition as-yet-uncivilized minority listener, whose status as such is sartorially marked. Such images therefore confirm the superiority of the implicitly-Han revolutionary enterprise,⁶⁸ but I would further suggest that these photographs were also crucial to the construction of a prescriptive socialist domesticity—that is, what the “magic boxes” ultimately work to bring about within these images. What better way to model modern, socialist domesticity—for the Han viewer and the world at large—than by promoting it as a “civilizing process,” marshaled by the Party in its project to remake the frontier? In this context, it is notable that, unlike radios and loudspeakers, record players are not, as a rule, pictured thus; they do not feature as “magic boxes” forging socialist domesticity, though they undoubtedly served this purpose in ‘real life’—more on this in a moment. Instead, they appear in fixed broadcast stations and, much more surprisingly, in the fields as portable sources of sound, reaching those last remaining tracts of land as yet unconquered by the wired loudspeaker network.

In late 1968, a great wave of urban youth began to descend on the countryside—from the borderlands of Inner Mongolia to the tropical island of Hainan to the frigid expanses of Manchuria. Many brought with them an interest in technology, music, literature, and the performing arts; some could boast skills and training in these areas; and a precious few carried radios, record players, records, and books with them on their journey out of the cities. These materials ran the gamut from official cultural production to hand-copied Balzac novels. In some cases, distance from the cities translated into the relaxation of restrictions on cultural consumption, facilitating the creation of an increasing number of impromptu *shalong* or ‘salons.’ There were fewer eyes to surveil and fewer ears to overhear, which made tuning in to “enemy” radio stations emanating from Hong Kong or listening to a recording of Debussy’s “Clair de Lune” far less dangerous in the countryside than in densely

⁶⁶ Ralph A Litzinger, *Other Chinas: The Yao and the Politics of National Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 225.

⁶⁷ Sara L Friedman, "Embodying Civility: Civilizing Processes and Symbolic Citizenship in Southeastern China", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 3 (2004): 687-718. This situation is likewise addressed by Susan McCarthy: “[t]o the extent [minorities] lose tradition and culture, they lose the identity through which their Chinese membership is bestowed; to the extent they don’t modernise, they are inferior citizens.” Susan McCarthy, "Ethno-Religious Mobilisation and Citizenship Discourse in the People's Republic of China", *Asian Ethnicity* 1, no. 2 (2000): 107-116.

⁶⁸ For a discussion of minorities’ importance in the construction of Han identity, see, among others, Dru C Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (1994): 92-123.

populated areas. There was, in this regard, much more room to maneuver on the frontier.

Such gatherings did also take place in urban environments, however, albeit at greater risk to the participants. Indeed, they feature prominently in Bei Dao's recollections of three of his favorite records: Strauss's "The Blue Danube," Tchaikovsky's "Capriccio Italien," and Paganini's "Violin Concerto No.4 in D minor." The fact that these are all western classical music records should remind us that listening to records was, more often than not, part of an elite cultural practice, both in the sense that the materials required were luxury items and that listeners often had designs on a certain musical erudition. If one was lucky enough to own or have access to a record player for personal use, chances are one was not listening to the *yangbanxi* or anything else that might be broadcast over the loudspeaker network. In this might be found a form of distinction. But what interests me most here is the way in which this kind of listening—this kind of cultural consumption—produced spaces that constituted themselves in contradistinction to those of official mass publicity.

We pulled close the heavy curtains, filled our wine glasses, lit our cigarettes, and let the music shatter the night around us, taking us far away. Because we'd listened to it so many times, the needle first had to cross a scratchy expanse before reaching the glorious work. A short pause. Kang Cheng gestured to emphasize his words as he started to explain the second section [of the Tchaikovsky]: "At the crack of dawn, a small band of travelers crossed the ruins of ancient Rome..." It was late. The music was finished, but nobody left. We slept, strewn about left and right, as the needle kept slipping at the end of the record with a *zila zila*.⁶⁹

The closed curtains and the record player combine to produce a space beyond the purview of the official cultural apparatus—a space couched in claims of an alternative, unapologetically bourgeois domestic sphere rooted in frivolity and leisure. In other words, Bei Dao's sonic haven invokes and reproduces the record player's historical role as a hallmark of the 'decadent' bourgeois home, a home constituted by technology, consumption, and individual choice. If, in this chapter's epigraph, "[m]usic," for Bei Dao, "becomes a substitute for silence," as Evan Eisenberg suggests ("I would shut out the ear-piercing loudspeakers beyond my window, put the volume way down, and play my favorite record"), here, the record primarily enacts the fantasy of the domestic as "desert island,"⁷⁰ of "record listening" as a "contribut[ion] to a hermetic world walled by favorite recorded sounds."⁷¹ Closed windows and drawn curtains, when combined with a sounding turntable, become (uncomfortable?) analogs for the Tupperware burp seal of the future, plastic home.

⁶⁹ My translation. Bei, "Changpian", 42-43.

⁷⁰ Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Explorations in Phonography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), 44.

⁷¹ William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

In truth, of course, this hermeticism is imperfect. The boundaries of this precarious domesticity are and remain porous, the space created short-lived—even more so in the cities than in the countryside. The means of its (re)production—i.e. records—were always subject to seizure by the authorities. Bei Dao, for example, was relieved of his Tchaikovsky after an official search. Where and when this bourgeois domesticity is performed, then, it takes on the fleeting, oppositional character of Hakim Bey’s “Temporary Autonomous Zones” or TAZs, which exist “not only beyond Control but also beyond definition, beyond gazing and naming as acts of enslaving, beyond the understanding of the State, beyond the State’s ability to see.”⁷² But the TAZ can only operate in this ‘beyond’ for so long: it “is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla [sic] operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it.”⁷³ The (bourgeois) domestic bubble must sporadically shift and reconstitute, lest it be summarily popped once and for all.

In a sense, the hermeticism is imperfect here, too, in that Bei Dao listens in the presence of others. Strictly speaking, this is not one of Eisenberg’s “ceremonies of a solitary;”⁷⁴ we have a group of listeners constituted as such, in part, through sound. More to the point, however, this particular group of listeners is also implicated in a larger “imagined listening community,” extending far beyond the confines of a single, dark room—an “imagined listening community” that, to use William Howland Kenney’s evocative phrase, listens “alone together.”⁷⁵ To the extent that this scene invokes the fantasy of the desert island, that island is part of a vast archipelago, a network of TAZs forged in bourgeois domesticity.

This was far more likely to be enacted out on the frontier than in the cities, but even as the privately-owned record player, transported from the urban apartment to the rural commune, helped to facilitate the momentary production of spaces over which the Party had even more limited or no control, we see, in the few published photographs of record players in the 1970s, an effort to marshal technology and sent-down youth in order to extend the scope of officially-endorsed mass publicity and the nation through sound. There is a remarkable example of this in a 1974 collection of photographs of youngsters sent to the northeast. (Figure 2.2) Two girls are shown sitting under a tree on the edge of an agricultural field—laboring peasants are just barely visible in the background. The young women are hard at work, too. They are surrounded by audio equipment: a microphone, a record player, stacks of records, a loudspeaker hidden among the leaves. The girl on the left is in the midst of reading a report, while the other looks on with a smile, ready to change records when her comrade is finished. They are broadcasters in the mold of “The Red Broadcast Station”’s little Tiezhu. Here, at the end of the world, they are beyond the reach of the wired loudspeaker network and the electric grid, but they must nonetheless find a way

⁷² Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1991), 130.

⁷³ Original emphasis. *Ibid.*, 99.

⁷⁴ Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel* 43-68.

⁷⁵ Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life* 4.



Figure 2.2 Broadcasters in the field. As published in Heilongjiang shengchan jianshe budui zhengzhibu 黑龙江生产建设部队政治部, *Zhishi qingnian zai Beidahuang* 知识青年在北大荒 [Sent-Down Youth in the Northeast] (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1973), 51.

to sound the revolution. Luckily for them, the great migration of sent-down youth to the countryside coincided with a renewed interest in the manually powered record player and the arrival of the flexi-disc.

Whereas the 1950s and early 1960s had been characterized by a marked tendency toward the development of electric record players, beginning in the late 1960s, hand-cranked record players returned to prominence. The Beijing Radio

Factory (*Beijing wuxiandian chang*), for example, achieved great success with its line of “Peony” (*Mudan*) luxury brand radios in the late 1950s.⁷⁶ In 1959, it began offering a new combination model: the Peony 1201 added a four-speed record player with a diamond-tip needle to its Peony radio base and frame. It was a console-style unit (Figure 2.3) and was endorsed by the likes of then-President Liu Shaoqi. In 1961, the Beijing Radio Factory took the concept to the next level by adding an audio recorder and a television to the mix. Transistorization changed the game completely and the bulk of the industry shifted from making large, console models to small, portable devices in the mid-1960s. But how does one combine a transistor radio with a record player and maintain flexibility of operation outside the home or broadcast station? Enter the hand crank, long pooh-poohed in favor of electricity. Thus, in 1968, the Beijing Radio Factory began producing the “East Is Red” (*Dongfang hong*) 101: a two-speed, hand-crank operated record player with built-in battery-powered transistor radio and amplifier, perfect for the most intrepid broadcaster and/or rusticated music lover.⁷⁷ Other record player manufacturers began offering similar devices as well.

Just as these new combination units became available, China Records began producing a new kind of record: the flexi-disc. As their name suggests, flexi-discs are flexible records, usually made from thin, malleable sheets of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic. Eva-Tone, Inc., based in Clearwater, Fl., and its licensees (Lyntone in the UK), began producing the first commercially available flexi-discs—the format was trademarked Soundsheets—in 1962. China Records successfully produced its own first 33 1/3 rpm seven-inch flexi-disc—*bomo changpian*, in Chinese—in 1966 and achieved full-scale production in 1968. The records came in red, blue, and green, could hold about six minutes of music (or spoken text) per side, and were practically indestructible. The sound quality may well have been horrible, but they were much more affordable than the typical ten-inch micro-groove LP. Flexi-discs quickly became the dominant format in the PRC, with a full and—at least by Cultural Revolution standards—varied catalog, in which the *yangbanxi* were very well represented, as I have already mentioned. Returning our attention to the young broadcasters in Figure 2.2, we might note the appearance of *yangbanxi* heroes on the record sleeve to the lower left of the photograph. This is precisely the sleeve used for all *yangbanxi* flexi-discs. The girls have taken to the fields and, thanks to the flexi-disc, they have been able to bring stacks of music with them without any cause for trepidation. Like the return of the hand crank, the flexi-disc facilitates a different conceptualization of the record player and its appropriate milieu. This is the polar opposite of the phonograph-as-furniture; this is the record player colonizing the frontier.

These sorts of images of record players out in the countryside are reminiscent of the discourse surrounding mobile film projection teams and, to a certain extent, touring propaganda and opera troupes. In the case of traveling projection units, which

⁷⁶ Peony’s main, domestic competition was the “Panda” (*xiongmao*) line, produced in Nanjing.

⁷⁷ Production of the East Is Red 101 only lasted a few years. It was surpassed by the Haiyan 713—also a two-speed, hand crank record player/transistor radio manufactured by the Beijing Radio Factory—in the early 1970s.



牡丹1201

Figure 2.3 Peony 1201 combination unit. “Beijingshi shouyinji gongye fazhan shi” 北京市收音机工业发展史 [Developmental History of the Radio Industry in Beijing City]. http://www.360doc.com/content/12/0410/18/137012_202542998.shtml (accessed July 13, 2015)

first emerged in the early 1950s, the medium of film and collective viewing practices sought not only to map out the boundaries of mediated, national space, but also to help forge new national subjects.⁷⁸ We might well understand the national project of electrification and the expansion of the wired broadcast network along the same lines. The mobile and mobilized record player allowed this sounding of national, revolutionary space to expand even further. Despite the similarities in the ways in which the mobility of film projectors and record players appear to have been harnessed by the CCP, however, it is nonetheless important to bear in mind that the two technologies had very different cultural associations when it came to notions of domesticity. Film viewing was always something done outside the (urban) home—thus the importance of the cinema as a quintessentially ‘modern,’ public space and,

⁷⁸ Tina Mai Chen, "Propagating the Propaganda Film: The Meaning of Film in Chinese Communist Party Writings, 1949-1965", *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 15, no. 2 (2003): 154-193.

conversely, the very different appeal of television. Record players, on the other hand, as we have seen, have long been associated with bourgeois domesticity; prior to 1949, they 'belonged' primarily in the petty urbanite home. The depiction of record players *en plain air* and in spaces of labor—as opposed to spaces of leisure—establishes the record player's new domain, while also reminding us of what it is no longer officially allowed to be: a technology of (bourgeois) 'home' entertainment.

And yet, be that as it may, one also notes that the expansion of wired loudspeakers, broadcast stations, and truly portable record players, was often promoted right alongside the expansion of local—in some cases, mobile—retail options. Indeed, in the 1970s, increasing emphasis was placed on door-to-door delivery (*song huo shang men*) as a retail service available to those in even the most rural of locales. The correct implementation of this service became the subject of such nationally-promoted operas as the 1973-4 northern *pingju Xiangyang Store* (*Xiangyang shangdian*)—available, incidentally, on vinyl in its entirety as a four-record set or as a one-record compilation of excerpted arias—and the Hunan *huaguxi Delivering Goods on the Road* (*Song huo lushang*) of 1974-5. In both cases, delivering consumer commodities to the laboring masses is couched as important revolutionary work and, like Tiezhu's broadcast station, a threat to class enemies hidden amongst the masses. Given my interest here in records and record players, however, it seems fitting to address the representation of such retail options in relation to an LP.

In 1974, China Records released M-1022, a collection of songs exported under the English title "Where the Motherland Needs Us Most, There Is Our Home." The original Chinese title has a slightly different connotation, literally translating to something along the lines of "The Intent of the Revolutionary Youth Is All around" (*Geming qingnian zhi zai sifang*). Regardless, the unifying theme of the record is the glorification of the staunch revolutionary young person engaged in the mundane tasks of the everyday: there are songs in praise of youth team members, rusticated youth, tractor drivers, truck drivers, teachers, newspaper delivery boys, and kitchen workers. These figures are laudable precisely because they combine revolutionary fervor with behavior and jobs that seem anything but revolutionary. The daily grind of socialist construction on the frontier does not dampen their spirits; they are heroes of a remarkably tame and boring sort. To this pantheon of the revolutionary quotidian is added the socialist retailer, to whom two of the album's twelve songs are dedicated. In "Going up the Mountain, a Basket on My Back" (*Shenbei beiluo shangshan lai*), a female choir jauntily proclaims, "I don't fear the rainstorm, I don't fear the hot sun, my feet tread the winding road, my breast as wide as the sea. I am a people's retailer, over the mountain and across the range I go, a red heart for the people, Chairman Mao's teachings etched in my heart." As with everything else, socialist delivery is undertaken "for the people," the traveling salesperson's ultimate reward not currency, but the praise of the masses: "although my basket is small, it is full of sentiment and meaning, the poor and lower-middle peasants break into a smile."

Except, of course, that peasants could not purchase the commodities brought to their doorsteps from "over the mountain and across the range" with an encouraging word and a pleasant face—they still needed money (and, in many cases, ration tickets



Figure 2.4 Shopping in Inner Mongolia. As published in *Minzu huabao* 民族画报 [Minority Pictorial], no. 3 (1966): 26

and/or officially endorsed letters of permission). There was also always the issue of the kinds of goods that made it into the retailer's basket or cart. Such salespeople brought necessities to the remote commune, not leisure items, like records and record players—that was not their role in the socialist economy and few of their customers could afford such luxuries anyway. If we look at the pages of *People's Pictorial* and *Minority Pictorial* in the 1970s, however, we note a recurring motif: over and over again, the same 'exotic' peoples shown huddled around the "magic boxes" of socialist domesticity are photographed while shopping. They consistently find themselves awash in commodities. (Figure 2.4) Ann Anagnost has suggested that, in the postsocialist period, the "civilizing processes" directed at minorities include the modeling of prescriptive modes of consumption, of the 'correct' ways in which commodities should be consumed.⁷⁹ These official images suggest that shopping was understood and promoted as a "civilizing process" before the transition to postsocialism as well. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that the modern, national, socialist subject is envisioned in these Cultural Revolution-era photographs as no less of a consumer—of media, of new fangled technologies, of commodities—than her capitalist cousin. It is, rather, the

⁷⁹ Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China, Body, Commodity, Text* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 75-97.

modes and political implications of that consumption, including those attending imaginings of mass publicity and domesticity, that have shifted.

Allow me, therefore, to conclude with a radical proposition: even as the centralized broadcast network and all its constituent parts produced and expanded spaces of mass publicity—in part through the forging of a new, socialist domesticity—during the Cultural Revolution, the bourgeois domesticity the latter was supposed to replace did not disappear. It was instead simply dis-placed: pushed out to the margins, where those same mobile record players might be used to (re)produce ‘counterrevolutionary’ music, to sound different kinds of publics and constructions of ‘home.’ What if we read the paucity of images of record players in the home not so much as a reflection of how rarely they were in fact found there, but as indicative of an anxiety that the bourgeois domesticity such images would so clearly invoke was still operative in ways too potentially unsettling to acknowledge? I am suggesting, in essence, that we read the Cultural Revolution history of the record player against the grain (or groove?), that we listen to it backwards and at the ‘wrong’ speed. My contention is that if we do this, as I have attempted to do in this chapter, we hear a complex process of call and response between the echo of the bourgeois home and the wail of revolution.

Chapter 3:
Porcelain in the Time of Socialism: Stasis, Narrative, and the Temporalities of Display

Of all the material objects produced during the Cultural Revolution in association with the *yangbanxi*, arguably the most well-known and valued today on the antiques market are the ceramic statuettes of their model heroes and heroines. The vast majority of these are made of porcelain, building on the long tradition of decorative porcelain figurines in China and remaking it in the socialist mode. That the development of such a socialist reinvention of this art form constituted a veritable project may come as somewhat of a surprise. After all, porcelain tchotchkes were *the* paradigmatic example of bourgeois ‘coziness’ in the Soviet Union,¹ and one might expect, therefore, a similar effort to rid Chinese decors of such pieces as well, especially in periods of extreme anti-bourgeois fervor. And yet, we must grapple with the existence of pieces such as the one depicted in Figure 3.1: the porcelain base of an electric lamp, ornamented with the unmistakable figure of a young woman on point. There is little doubt that the woman in question is meant to be Xi’er, the protagonist of *The White-Haired Girl* (*Bai mao nü*), specifically, as she is portrayed in the ballet—that is to say, the *yangbanxi*—version of the piece. Her white mane and elegant arabesque, complete with correctly turned-out left foot, identify her as such.² This is not the Xi’er of the 1940s or 1950s opera, but rather the perfected heroine of Cultural Revolution stage and screen, who has found her way onto an object of domestic consumption.

How do we make sense of Xi’er’s invocation, here? On the one hand, she seems integral to the lamp’s celadon-green base, out of which she emerges. Head, hair, left upper arm, torso, and supporting leg are fused into the rolling, glazed shapes, suggesting rock formations and tree branches, at the figure’s back—if she had one, that is. Only when arms and working leg extend beyond the reach of the cylinder meant to encase the lamp’s internal wiring do we get a sense of Xi’er’s potential structural independence. Even so, there is no chance of losing Xi’er to her ‘surroundings’: not just her coloring, but the fact that she is matte—painted on the biscuit—distinguishes her from the shiny masses out of which she is apparently formed. She may be of the lamp proper, but she also appears in excess of it, as though she could tear herself from it and take flight, if she chose to do so. In short, Xi’er resides in a liminal space, simultaneously both integral and superfluous to our conceptualization of and interaction with the lamp-qua-lamp.

¹ For the politics of porcelain in the USSR of the 1920s and 1930s, see Karen Kettering, “‘Ever More Cosy and Comfortable’: Stalinism and the Soviet Domestic Interior, 1928–1938”, *Journal of Design History* 10, no. 2 (1997): 119-135; For more general discussions of different approaches to Soviet daily life, or ‘byt,’ see Boym, *Common Places*; Buchli, *An Archeology of Socialism*; Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*.

² The figure’s costume, on the other hand, may give one pause, for it more closely resembles the red outfit worn by Wu Qinghua in *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzi jun*) while she is tortured in her landlord’s dungeon.



Figure 3.1 Lamp featuring Xi'er from *The White-Haired Girl* (*Bai mao nü*), 21cm. Collection of the author.

I would like to suggest, moreover, that the figure's in-between-ness, as it were, in relation to the very idea of the lamp is symptomatic of the relationship between the lamp as an element of interior decoration and the notion of use-value. What, after all, is the use-value of decoration? Or—more exactly and in the contemporary business vernacular—what is its value-add? The use-value of the porcelain lamp base itself, insofar as its function is its ability to support and power a lightbulb, is completely unaffected by the presence or absence of the ornamental figure. Therein lies Xi'er's superfluity. And yet, she is by no means without purpose or function in and of herself.

It is here primarily through her that we are drawn into issues of style, fashion, distinction, and taste. Xi'er's presence is undeniably crucial to differentiating between this particular lamp base and any other and, further, brings with it all manner of cultural and political baggage, including, and perhaps especially, her connection with a given narrative. In other words, the ways in which individuals might interact with this object are very much informed by Xi'er's appearance, a fact potentially very unsettling for a socialist project deeply suspicious of frivolous consumption, i.e., the consumption of commodities esteemed for something other than their immediate use-value. And it is, I will argue, precisely in this move away from 'mere' use-value — on some level always inevitable, perhaps — that the peculiar, transitional temporality of socialism is at once borne out and contested.

If the lamp with which I have begun, here, is something of a hybrid — an object with a particular function adorned with what seems to be otherwise useless — in what follows, I focus on what happens when Xi'er really does take flight, thereby transforming from a figure of excess to a stand-alone figurine of questionable political status. I focus, that is, on the porcelain statuettes, produced in association with the *yangbanxi*, that threaten to take up the capitalist mantle of frivolity out of its historically 'appropriate' time. In this chapter, I examine these objects, bound up with the display of wealth, with an eye towards the multiple temporalities they concretize and engender — to speak of fashion and design, after all, is in the end to speak of time, of being *au courant* or *passé*. I begin with a brief look at some of the changes brought to China's so-called 'porcelain capital,' Jingdezhen, after the Communist takeover in 1949. The CCP's effort to mechanize porcelain production resulted in the creation and consolidation of enormous factories, including one devoted to porcelain sculpture (*ciou* or *cidiao*), which were in turn critical to molding Jingdezhen's laborers into a veritable proletariat. I discuss the development of *yangbanxi* statuettes within the context of modernizing both the art form and its mode of production before turning to the connection between these statuettes and the theatrical practice of *liangxiang* — 'striking a pose' — and the implications of this connection for conceptions of the statuettes' implied temporalities and narrative potential. How might we read these statuettes as emblems of static socialist time? How do they operate in excess of the temporality of perpetually deferred communist utopia? And how does the relationship between these porcelain figurines and their onlookers participate in constructions of history/History?

Revolutionizing the Porcelain Industry

Jingdezhen's reputation as China's porcelain production leader is indisputable. While other provinces, including Shandong, Fujian, Hunan, and Guangdong, boast rich and distinctive ceramic traditions of their own, the Jingdezhen area of Jiangxi has had a largely unchallenged claim on high-end porcelain since at least the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), when its kilns began supplying the capital with ceramics.³ It held the

³ For an overview of the textual sources concerning the relationship between Jingdezhen and the Ming capital, see Margaret Medley, "Ching-tê Chên and the

status of *guanyao*, or 'official kiln,' during the Qing (1644-1911), producing inventive and technologically-challenging pieces to satisfy the emperors' insatiable appetite for porcelain. Qianlong's reign (1735-96) is particularly associated with the development of new, illusionist aesthetics, made possible by advancements in kiln and glaze technologies devised at Jingdezhen.⁴ From the iconic blue-and-white (*qinghua*) pattern-ware, still so sought after in the west, to high-fire glazes mimicking Tang-dynasty stoneware, Jingdezhen is synonymous with porcelain—in late-imperial China, throughout the twentieth-century, and still today. Add to that porcelain production's significance to a narrative of Chinese national distinction,⁵ and it should come as no surprise that the CCP took a great interest in creating a new, revolutionary Jingdezhen when it came to power in 1949.

This interest took a number of forms, including a shift in the historiography of porcelain production, which now emphasized the heavy reliance of pre-1949 artisanal workshops on unskilled manual labor in order to extract raw materials. Maintaining clay, water, and timber supplies was in fact extremely labor-intensive, and the 1962 history of the industry, crafted by the municipal propaganda bureau, for example, recasts the members of this workforce as a proto-proletariat, trapped in a feudal system not unlike indentured servitude. The CCP's entry into Jingdezhen is therefore described in this volume as the coming of class consciousness to this group of hitherto oppressed laborers, after which the proletariat of Jingdezhen loosed its fetters and reached maturity.⁶ This new, historical orthodoxy allowed Jingdezhen to position itself as a centuries-old industrial city *avant la lettre* with a proletarian heritage that could constitute of revolutionary cachet. This in turn could help counteract porcelain's associations with luxury, the bourgeoisie, and the ruling elite. If porcelain was made by proletarian workers—and had been, in a sense, for years—then it lost some of its political ambivalence.

The construction of an actual proletariat required more than a rewriting of local history, however. It also meant the development of new, appropriately 'modern,' and revolutionary institutions and labor structures. Porcelain production left the realm of the artisanal workshop and was ushered into the realm of the massive, nationalized factory with a concerted effort that began even before the official birth of the People's Republic. In August 1949, the county-level CCP committee took over the Jiangxi

Problem of the 'Imperial Kilns', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 29, no. 2 (1966): 326-338.

⁴ For a consideration of illusionist aesthetics in painting under Qianlong, see Kristina Kleutghen, *Imperial Illusions: Crossing Pictorial Boundaries in the Qing Palaces* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

⁵ For a look at the international circulation of discourse and images related to porcelain production and Jingdezhen in the Qing period and beyond, see Ellen Huang, "From the Imperial Court to the International Art Market: Jingdezhen Porcelain Production As Global Visual Culture", *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 115-145.

⁶ *Cidu jilang* 瓷都激浪 [Turbulent Waves in the Porcelain Capital], ed. Zhonggong Jingdezhen shiwei xuanchuanbu 中共景德镇市委宣传部 (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 1962).

Porcelain Company (*Jiangxi ciye gongsi*), located on the premises of what had been the imperial workshops during the Qing dynasty (on present-day Shengli Road). On April 1, 1950, the Jingdezhen Jianguo Porcelain Company (*Jingdezhen shi jianguo ciye gongsi*) was officially established, incorporating a number of other, smaller facilities throughout 1951, only to be renamed the Jingdezhen Jianguo Porcelain Factory (*Jingdezhen shi jianguo cichang*) in 1952. As its name suggests (literally, ‘establish the nation’), Jianguo was New China’s first, centralized foray into the business of making porcelain—but it was only the beginning. More nationally-funded factories were developed throughout the 1950s, eventually earning the group designation ‘the ten great porcelain factories of Jingdezhen’ (*Jingdezhen shi da cichang*), a phrase still in circulation today, despite the expansion of ever-more production facilities. These factories are generally understood to be the PRC equivalent of the imperial kilns: a play to monopolize high-end porcelain production for the benefit of the bureaucratic elites, an interpretation reinforced by Jianguo’s physical location and the prestige afforded to it as a result. But in reality Jianguo and its brethren are manifestations of a much larger process of growth and consolidation. According to official statistics, in 1950 a combined average 15,900 people worked in Jingdezhen’s 2,492 porcelain manufacturers—1,651 of which were individually run workshops. By 1957, this total workforce had grown to 28,849, but the number of porcelain production units had shrunk to a measly 57—32 of which employed a combined 53 people in individual ateliers. In other words, in 1957, 99.9% of workers in the porcelain industry were employed by only 25 production entities, all of which benefitted from some level of official investment.⁷ It is my contention that these increasingly homogeneous working conditions were key to forging erstwhile laborers into socialist proletarian worker-subjects. These large factories constituted crucial environments for the production of a classically-recognizable proletariat right alongside porcelain vases.

Critical to this process was not just the consolidation of these new work units, but also the changes they brought in the way porcelain was produced, specifically, with the much lauded introduction of new machinery in the factory setting. Modernizing Jingdezhen’s defining industry was consistently equated with increased mechanization, automation, and the standardization such changes permitted (*ciye shengchan zou jixiehua zidonghua de daolu*). There were to be no more small batches of clay or hand-molded dishware; the large nationalized factories, in particular, promoted themselves as modern sites of mass production.⁸ The artisanal mode of yesteryear, which encouraged a system of value predicated on the uniqueness of a singular, hand-crafted piece, was pitched against a system in which the goal was to produce as many identical, machine-made articles as possible. While these machines were to be operated by members of the proletariat, themselves cogs in the new machinery of revolution, there would be little chance of mistaking these workers for craftspersons or artists,

⁷ Jingdezhenshi jingji jihua weiyuanhui *Jingdezhen shi guomin jingji tongji ziliao (1950-1957)* 景德镇市国民经济统计资料 (1950-1957) [National Economic Statistical Data for Jingdezhen City (1950-1957)] 景德镇市经济计划委员会 (n.p.1958), 23.

⁸ Mechanization was particularly effective in the pressing of clay molds (*ya pi*), which was considerably faster than relying on traditional potter’s wheels.

given their limited, tactile interaction with the porcelain-in-progress.⁹ The less they touched it—the more they interacted with the machines instead—the more this idealized workforce became the same as that of any other industry and porcelain became just another material, on a par with plastic or steel.

The emphasis on increasingly mechanized mass production continued throughout the Mao period but is most clearly reflected in the official statistical record of the 1950s. In 1952, the city of Jingdezhen and its surrounding county produced 90,220,870 porcelain consumer items (*riyong ci*).¹⁰ By 1957, thanks in large part to the mechanization of the production process and the expansion/consolidation of factory facilities, this total number had ballooned to 275,872,120, a 205% increase.¹¹ Based on the limited data available, this appears to have been peak production, at least in terms of the aggregate number of porcelain pieces. In 1958, despite or perhaps because of the Great Leap Forward (one presumes that consumer porcelains were not the priority), this total was down to 237,572,400;¹² when we pick things up again in 1974, this number had decreased to 216,851,700.¹³ Even with this dip—which, incidentally, was quickly turned around by 1977¹⁴—the amount of porcelain consistently produced by Jingdezhen’s factories was simply astounding.

Unfortunately, impressive as these numbers are, they tell us very little about the quality and specific kinds of consumer items produced. As to the former, we must rely on the three-tier classification system employed in the official record of the 1950s, whereby porcelain is designated as coarse (*cu*), fine (*xi*), or common (*putong*). Despite the apparent effort to increase the quantity of porcelains across the board—with the aim, I would suggest, to combat the material’s elitist associations through mass production—high-end porcelains remained the single most important focus of the industry in Jingdezhen. In 1958, for example, a year for which we have data for each of the three classifications, 54.76% of consumer porcelain production was dedicated to

⁹ For an account of the mechanization of Red Star Porcelain Factory (*Hongxing cichang*) and one man’s journey to earning the title of engineer (*gongchengshi*), see the story of Zhang Shuigui in *Cidu jilang* 385-395.

¹⁰ This category is in contradistinction to porcelain pieces created for industrial or building purposes.

¹¹ Jingdezhenshi jingji jihua weiyuanhui, *Jingdezhenshi guomin jingji tongji ziliao (1950-1957)* 25.

¹² Jingdezhenshi jingji jihua weiyuanhui *Jingdezhenshi guomin jingji tongji ziliao (1958)* 景德镇市国民经济统计资料（1958） [National Economic Statistical Data for Jingdezhen City (1958)] 景德镇市经济计划委员会 (n.p.1959), 25.

¹³ Jingdezhenshi geming weiyuanhui jihua weiyuanhui *Jingdezhenshi guomin jingji tongji ziliao (1974)* 景德镇市国民经济统计资料（1974） [National Economic Statistical Data for Jingdezhen City (1974)] 景德镇市革命委员会计划委员会 (n.p.1975), 89.

¹⁴ The comparable production figure for 1977 is 251,416,500 items. Jingdezhenshi geming weiyuanhui jihua weiyuanhui *Jingdezhenshi guomin jingji tongji ziliao (1977)* 景德镇市国民经济统计资料（1977） [National Economic Statistical Data for Jingdezhen City (1977)] 景德镇市革命委员会计划委员会 (n.p.1978), 107.

fine pieces.¹⁵ While Cultural Revolution-era statistics do not include such information, we do know that 44.34% of consumer porcelains produced in 1974 were slated for export.¹⁶ 1977 saw a similar export ratio of 49.20%.¹⁷ Insofar as we can assume that exported porcelain, directed at the international market, was of the finest quality available and that the proportion of high-end porcelain production remained relatively steady, then we must conclude that almost all of the porcelain intended for domestic consumption was of the coarse and common varieties. As to discerning what these consumer porcelains actually were — plates vs. vases vs. Mao badges, etc. — the statistical record remains somewhat helpful in that production numbers are broken down by major factory. Since each factory had its specialities, we can roughly estimate the kind and number of each sort of item.

This brings us to the interesting case of the Jingdezhen Porcelain Sculpture Factory (*Jingdezhen diaosu cichang*) (hereafter, Sculpture Factory), which provides an important window into the ongoing contradictions at the heart of the project to remake the porcelain industry, as I have been describing it. Founded in 1957 through the consolidation of individual workshops, societies devoted to art and sculpture, and experimental production facilities, it quickly entered the ranks of the ‘ten great porcelain factories of Jingdezhen’ and benefitted from national backing. Because, as its name suggests, Sculpture Factory specialized in the production of sculpted porcelains, we can safely assume that the 324,000 porcelain items Sculpture Factory produced for domestic consumption in 1974 were all of this character — that is to say, essentially decorative.¹⁸ From reliefs to figurines, these porcelains were not meant to be used — as a tea set might, for example — as part of quotidian life, so much as displayed and visually enjoyed. Even in the somewhat unique case of the lamp with which I began this chapter, the figure of Xi’er, i.e. the sculptural element of the piece, operates, as I have argued, in excess of the lamp’s use-value as a lamp, taking on the form of decoration. I would suggest that, on the one hand, the political discomfort caused by this defining sense of excess helps account for Sculpture Factory’s higher-than-average export percentage — a staggering 76.04% in 1974, for example.¹⁹ The vast majority of these pieces were intended for consumption outside the Chinese socialist system, making them considerably less politically problematic. On the other hand, Sculpture Factory itself as an institution is emblematic of the tension between the drive toward mass production and standardization and the persistence of the notion of the individuated artist or master as producer of aesthetic value. In other words, the development of Sculpture Factory illustrates the ways in which the new modes of

¹⁵ Jingdezhenshi jingji jihua weiyuanhui, *Jingdezhenshi guomin jingji tongji ziliao (1958)* 26.

¹⁶ Jingdezhenshi geming weiyuanhui jihua weiyuanhui, *Jingdezhenshi guomin jingji tongji ziliao (1974)* 89.

¹⁷ Jingdezhenshi geming weiyuanhui jihua weiyuanhui, *Jingdezhenshi guomin jingji tongji ziliao (1977)* 107.

¹⁸ Jingdezhenshi geming weiyuanhui jihua weiyuanhui, *Jingdezhenshi guomin jingji tongji ziliao (1974)* 90.

¹⁹ Ibid.

production initiated in the PRC struggled to bring about the fundamental changes to which it had aspired.

The key, here, is the extent to which, within the very factory environment intended to be the fount of a new, faceless, and nameless proletariat, masters of porcelain sculpture continued to produce singular pieces with which they were identified as individuals. And nowhere is this more clearly in evidence than at Sculpture Factory, since so much of its success in the decorative arts profited—as it were—from both a claim to socialist modernity, by way of its size and institutional structure, and the cultural capital of the artists under its employ. Consider the inextricable link between the history of Sculpture Factory and the oeuvre of the most important porcelain artists of the Mao period. From father-son duo Zeng Longsheng and Zeng Shandong to He Shuigen and Liu Yuanchang, Sculpture Factory developed and was home to Jingdezhen's biggest names and talent, including faculty members of the Jingdezhen School of Ceramic Arts and Technology (*Jingdezhen taoci jiyi xuexiao*), a forerunner to today's Ceramics Institute (*Taoci xueyuan*), founded in 1955. Furthermore, it should come as no surprise that these same figures were crucial to the reinvention of porcelain sculpture as an aesthetic form appropriate to socialism, in addition to simply being—at least nominally—produced in a factory. Indeed, one suspects that this aesthetic reinvention would have been considerably more difficult without the gravitas of the artists involved in that process—a process to which I now turn.

Aesthetic Lineages

It is customary to begin accounts of the history of ceramic sculpture in Jingdezhen with a reference to Yi Ming's *Notes on the Southern Kilns* (*Nan yao biji*), a text dating from the early Qianlong period, i.e. the mid eighteenth century. In it, the author indicates that ceramic figurines of lions and elephants were produced in Jingdezhen in the early seventh century. Excavated artifacts seem to confirm the notion that carved ceramics existed, at the very least, during the Tang (618-907), with sculpted porcelains, including porcelain figurines, emerging and taking off during the Song (960-1279). The popularity of these pieces increased during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), with the advent of blue-and-white patterning. By the Ming, the possibilities for color application to sculpted works had increased significantly, allowing for the creation of much more intricate and varied detailing. The subject matter of porcelain sculptures during the Ming and Qing was increasingly tied to the representation of Buddhist figures and other gods and goddesses. The bodhisattva Guanyin was a particular favorite and continued to fascinate artists well into the PRC era, even as religious iconography became politically problematic—more on this in a moment.²⁰

²⁰ For a much more detailed, though still relatively brief, overview of this history, see Yu Zuqiu 余祖球 and Liang Ailian 梁爱莲, *Jingdezhen chuantong taoci diaosu* 景德镇传

Ceramic sculptures (*taoci diaosu*), of which porcelain sculptures are a subset,²¹ may be classified in a number of ways, including in accord with a defining technique and/or characteristic. There have traditionally been three basic technical categories, though one could easily come up with more: *fudiao* essentially comprise reliefs — not to be confused with engravings, or *diao*ke, in which designs are recessed on a surface rather than raised; *niediao* are pinched and/or hand-rolled and often involve the combination of small pieces prior to firing; and *lourdiao* are characterized by openwork. Each of these techniques may be used in isolation or in combination with others, in which case they correspond less to a type of sculpture than a form of ornamentation. The *linglong* wares for which Jingdezhen is so famous, for example, all necessitate the technique of *lourdiao* in order to achieve their characteristic pattern. An additional distinction is made between those pieces, like reliefs, that are intended to be viewed from a single direction — i.e. they concern themselves with a single viewing surface — as opposed to those pieces that are intended to be viewed from all angles. The latter is often referred to as ‘sculpture in the round,’ or *yuandiao* in Chinese.²² It is in this last category that I am most interested here.

More precisely, I am interested in what are known in the European context as porcelain figurines or statuettes. Viewable from 360 degrees, they can stand independently and are classic examples of *yuandiao*. Historically, the making of figurines has gravitated towards the representation of people and animals. During the late imperial period, as I have indicated above, porcelain sculptures of this sort were increasingly associated with the Buddhist pantheon of supernatural characters and other deities. After 1949, of course, such subject matter became increasingly problematic, tied as it was to the putative realm of superstition. Even so, some of the most persistent motifs were recuperated as folk, as opposed to religious, iconography. This attempt at recasting traditional tropes helps explain something like Zeng Longsheng’s *The Heavenly Maiden Scattering Flowers* (*Tiannü sanhua*) (hereafter, *Heavenly Maiden*), for example. Zeng had long been known for his porcelain sculptures of spirits and historical figures, and in honor of the PRC’s tenth anniversary in 1959, Zeng was instructed to produce a work on the theme of the ‘heavenly maiden’ for the Jiangxi room in the new Great Hall of the People in Beijing. At 1.34m tall, *Heavenly Maiden* required technical innovations in porcelain firing, but the aesthetics of the piece are very much in keeping with what we might expect of a classically-inspired, Buddhist-inflected work. The heavenly maiden is thin, willowy, and awash in movement, dressed in flowing, green skirts and adorned with rippling, red ribbons. She stands on a base of stylized clouds, sign of her celestial domain. Despite the heavenly maiden’s fixity in space, the buffeting clouds that surround her evoke the motion of waves and eddies, much like her vestments. Indeed, it is this overwhelming sense of movement — used to

统陶瓷雕塑 [Traditional Ceramic Sculpture in Jingdezhen] (Nanchang: Jiangxi gaoxiao chubanshe, 2004), 6-12.

²¹ As a reminder, all porcelains are by definition ceramics, but all ceramics are not porcelains, ceramics being the more capacious term. Porcelain specifically requires vitrification.

²² For a comprehensive overview of the common classification schema, see *Ibid.*, 71-114.

convey the ephemerality of the other-worldly—in a by-definition static medium that marks *Heavenly Maiden* as a masterpiece in the traditional mode. In other words, one is meant to appraise *Heavenly Maiden*'s value as art by virtue of its successful execution of a particular theme as well as a particular aesthetic, very much in keeping with pre-1949 expectations. In this sense, *Heavenly Maiden* is a testament to an enduring mode of porcelain sculpture—one that remained central until the chaotic first few years of the Cultural Revolution.

This is not to suggest that this aesthetic lineage disappeared during the Cultural Revolution period altogether. Zeng Shandong's *Sword Dance* (*Jian wu*), completed in the early 1970s, is a prime example of the continued interest in movement and flowing lines. Even so, there is little doubt that the dominant aesthetic mode operative from 1966 to 1976 was much more closely aligned with the concerns of what we might call—somewhat anachronistically—socialist realism, the highly influential style imported to the PRC from the Soviet Union.²³ Officially, of course, the Cultural Revolution is the age of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism, but by invoking the notion of a socialist realist project in porcelain sculpture, I want to link some of the pieces most emblematic of the Cultural Revolution—the representation of *yangbanxi* characters on which the remainder of this chapter focuses—to the emphasis on realist aesthetics in the 1950s. It is during the course of this decade that historical, literary, and 'folk' characters as well as designated 'models' of revolutionary behavior began to usurp the central position of bodhisattvas and immortals as sculpture subjects. Moreover, when these more politically appropriate figures were fixed in porcelain, they tended to be represented as sturdy and rooted, rather than willowy and in motion.

In this regard, one might point to He Nianqi's 1958 *Girl with a Veil* (*Pisha shaonü*) as a particularly important breakthrough. The bust of a peasant girl wearing a headscarf, the piece may now strike us as somewhat underwhelming, but at the time, it was understood as evidence of the successful effort to modernize Jingdezhen. This is in part a function, perhaps, of its origin story: a directive issued by the relevant committee that Jingdezhen needed to produce something on the theme of 'a nude with a veil.'²⁴ He Nianqi's response to this directive is notable in at least two respects. First, there is the adaptation of the theme. Instead of a full nude, we are presented with a very much clothed bust. The veil reveals nothing; it covers. It has become a sign of well-kept country innocence rather than alluring transparency. Second, the technical execution of the veil or headscarf is remarkable in its verisimilitude. Whereas something like Zeng Longsheng's *Heavenly Maiden* is clearly concerned with using textiles to indicate movement, this headscarf is static. The investment here is in realist

²³ For a brilliant examination of socialist realism, see Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, trans. Jesse M Savage (New Haven: Yale University, 2007).

²⁴ The exact model was French, though it is unclear which specific work. One suspects something along the lines of Albert Aublet's *Nu avec un voile* (1883). Cao Chunsheng 曹春生 and Chen Liping 陈丽萍, *Jingdezhen diaosu ciyi* 景德镇雕塑瓷艺 [Porcelain Sculpture Art in Jingdezhen] (Guangzhou: Huanan ligong daxue chubanshe, 2008), 64.

aesthetics, and more specifically, an internationally-informed realist aesthetics. The piece was conceived as a response to a French work and later touted both inside and outside of China as proof of Jingdezhen's continued excellence in porcelain production. In this sense, *Girl with a Veil* speaks to the fact that porcelain sculpture in the PRC developed as part of an international, as well as historical, conversation.

It is primarily the influence of this international push and pull that helps account for both the kinds of figurines produced during the Cultural Revolution and, I would argue, their complex political valences. While the elitist associations of porcelain sculpture as a centuries-old traditional art form could be countered, at least in part, through the emphasis on mechanized mass production and the proletarian worker — addressed in the previous section — the very Marxist discourse that facilitated this reorientation was itself deeply suspicious of bourgeois consumption, and, crucially, its problematics of taste. As Karen Kettering makes clear, few exemplars of bourgeois “domestic trash” (*domashnyi kblam*) were targeted with as much vitriol in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and early 1930s as decorative ceramics.²⁵ Porcelain statuettes, all too commonly invoking “such [by proletarian standards] ‘tasteless’ subjects as unclad bathing beauties, sweet kittens, butterflies, miniature elephants, or charming pairs of lovers,”²⁶ seem to have been particularly offensive manifestations of bourgeois decoration sensibilities. The turn towards realist aesthetics brought this set of associations front and center in China as well. On the one hand, porcelain sculpture was a highly regarded art form that could serve the revolution. On the other hand, the shape that service took came heavily laden with its own political baggage. The result in the Cultural Revolution decade was a corpus of politically apropos figurines, overtly yoked to the *yangbanxi*, yet also evoking bourgeois modes of consumption.

Porcelain and Frozen Temporality

The details of specifically *yangbanxi*-related porcelain production are difficult to pin down, if only because so much of it appears to have been done in a relatively unsystematic manner. This has understandably created difficulties for porcelain appraisers, who, in the absence of marks, are often forced to determine a piece's authenticity simply by its quality, or more precisely, its lack thereof. The finer the execution of a figure's hands, for example, the greater the likelihood that it is a fake, the idea being that much of what was produced during the Cultural Revolution was the work of amateurs. Whether or not this was in fact the case — recognized artists were often pressed into service, their specialized skills sometimes trumping questionable class backgrounds²⁷ — the fact remains that there is much about the

²⁵ Kettering, “Ever More Cosy and Comfortable”, 126.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁷ The artists who worked on the so-called “7501” porcelains for Mao's use in 1975, for example, were a Who's Who of the porcelain industry. This was not the work of amateurs by any stretch of the imagination. For a brief account of this project, see Zeng Zhiquan 曾智泉 and Kong Yang 孔洋, “7501 ci--Zhongguo de “hongse

porcelains of this era that we do not know, including the range of pieces produced. That being said, porcelain collections such as that held at the Jianchuan Museum Cluster in Anren, Sichuan, leave little doubt that representations of the heroes of the *yangbanxi* were favored by sculptors as well as other ceramic workers/artists.²⁸ The Jianchuan Collection includes a number of examples of paintings or posters of *yangbanxi* reproduced on porcelain slabs, in addition to decorative plates and large vases ornamented in similar fashion. This suggests a remarkable variety of *yangbanxi*-related works, including sculpted porcelain figures.²⁹

As I argued in the previous section, much of the appraisal of traditional porcelain sculpture, especially in the case of figurines, was invested in the ways in which a motionless medium could approximate movement. From the emphasis on flowing textiles to the use of serpentine lines, highly regarded statuettes of spirits and gods tend to evoke fluidity rather than (even momentary) stasis. Not so with works associated with a socialist realist aesthetic lineage, I suggested, which focus on figures more firmly and authoritatively rooted in space. And as with space, so too with time. Indeed, there is something to be said for ceramic in general, and porcelain in particular, as a material especially conducive to thinking about temporality. The change from clay to finished product—vitrification—is one shrouded in mystery with a relatively high expectation of failure; skill and precision can only do so much. The kiln emerges as something with its own magic, residing outside the world of the mundane. Thus the notion of *yaobian* (literally, 'kiln change'): sometimes what comes out of the fire is utterly unexpected and ventures into the realm of myth and legend.³⁰

Sometimes, however, the magic of the kiln resides not in its affinity for instantaneous transformation per se, but rather in its ability to further isolate that moment of transformation in time. Consider the application of drip glazes, for example, in which the pull of gravity is countered by vitrification, the drop of glaze forever stayed on its downward trajectory. Consider, too, so-called flambé wares, whose particular distribution of color is unpredictable, dependent not so much on the potter as the position of oxidized particles in the glaze when air is introduced into the kiln.

guanyao" 7501—中国的“红色官窑” [7501 Porcelains: China's "Red Imperial Kiln"], *Wenwu shijie* 文物世界 [World of Antiquity] no. 6 (2009): 64-67.

²⁸ For a partial catalogue of the collection, see Fan Jianchuan 樊建川, "*Wenge*" *ciqu tujian* "文革"瓷器图鉴 [The Cultural Revolution Porcelain Wares] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2002).

²⁹ I hasten to add, however, that while there is little doubt that the *yangbanxi* were one of the few themes of guaranteed political correctness, they did not, by any means, have a monopoly on the decoration of porcelain—or anything else for that matter—during the Cultural Revolution. Despite post-Mao claims to the contrary, a considerable range of patterns and ornaments, albeit within carefully-policed yet ever-shifting bounds, seems to have been employed in Jingdezhen as well as other ceramic production centers.

³⁰ Ellen Huang, "Jingdezhen porcelain as mindful matter" (Unpublished AAS presentation, March 29, 2015).

These are aesthetics produced by chance and the stoppage of time. The temporality of ceramic and porcelain is, in this sense, a frozen one—grounded motionlessness becomes permanent monumentality, even when rendered on a small scale, as is often the case with porcelain sculpture. This sense is felt all the more strongly in the figurines of the heroes of the *yangbanxi*, since they often mimic the stage practice of *liangxiang* or ‘striking a pose,’ which creates moments of stasis that are themselves emphatic breaks in the theatrical narrative of which they are a part.

Liangxiang as an operatic device is by no means restricted to the Beijing operas of the *yangbanxi*. Chinese dramatic forms have long emphasized the (especially initial) appearance of characters on stage as well as the completion of a scene through the striking of key poses. With the rise of the *yangbanxi* in the Cultural Revolution, however, this practice became heavily laden with ideological significance. Indeed, the prominent use of *liangxiang* became one of the repertoire’s defining and unifying characteristics—the ballets incorporate these instances of set poses in their choreography just as we find them in the operatic models. Moreover, in a show of the importance of both the *yangbanxi* and this particular device, the term ‘*liangxiang*’ acquired a new political valence. First used in the expanded sense of ‘taking a stand’ or ‘picking a side in a dispute’ in a *People’s Daily* editorial on April 24, 1967, calls to *liangxiang* figure prominently in the political rhetoric of the late 1960s.³¹ From a theatrical standpoint, these poses were also endlessly reproduced by amateur performers of the *yangbanxi* in an effort, as I argue in Chapter 4, to mold and transform the bodies and subjectivities of the masses. At present, though, I wish simply to suggest that the apparent importance of *liangxiang*—which seems to have been well recognized at the time—stems in part from their narratological, and therefore temporal, status as curiously static moments of rupture. In other words, the striking of these poses creates instances during which the narratological action is drawn to a momentary halt. Narrative is temporarily frozen and rendered *tableau vivant*.

The ceramic incarnations of *yangbanxi* heroes tend to evoke these *tableaux*—often directly—by reproducing the theatrical gestures undertaken by the live-action characters. It is very common, for examples, to find figurines of individual characters, often directly imitating posters or production stills. In other cases, heroes from different model works may be found together, forming a kind of meta-tableau of the repertoire as a whole (Figure 3.2).³² The composition of these works is itself clearly reminiscent of that created on stage through *liangxiang*, with characters each adopting the pose with which he or she is most closely associated. What is more, figurines were also sometimes produced in sets, typically of eight or nine, which, taken all together, recapitulate the key scenes in a single *yangbanxi* work. The Jianchuan Museum

³¹ "Wenhua da geming" *cidian* 92.

³² For two such pieces from the collection of the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna, see *Die Kultur Der Kulturrevolution: Personenkult Und Politisches Design Im China Von Mao Zedong* (Gent: Snoeck Ducaju & Zoon, 2011), 210. See also Fan, "Wenge" *ciqi tujian* 103.



Figure 3.2 Group of *yangbanxi* heroes (Back row, left to right: Li Tiemei from *The Red Lantern* (*Hong deng ji*); Guo Jianguang from *Shajiabang*. Front row: Xi'er from *The White-Haired Girl*), 29.2cm. Collection of the author.

catalogue includes five such sets.³³ In these cases, the figurines are further tied to the practice of *liangxiang* by virtue of their shared narratological position—frozen moments within a larger narrative. To the extent that the theatrical *liangxiang* is a kind of *tableau vivant*, then, the porcelain remediation of this stage practice essentially turns the animate bodies of *tableau vivant* into the things of a *nature morte*—that is, into still life.

Note that this thingly transformation does not come at the expense of the *yangbanxi* porcelain figurine's narrative potential, a fact which might well make my

³³ Ibid., 87-102.

invocation of still life here counterintuitive. Still life, as Norman Bryson argues in his seminal work on the subject, appears in a certain sense anathema to narrative.

While history painting is structured around narrative, still life is the world minus its narratives, or better, the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest. To narrate is to name what is unique: the singular actions of individual persons. And narrative works hard to explain why any particular story is worth narrating, because the actions in the story are heroic or wonderful, or frightening or ignoble, or bad or good. The whole principle of storytelling is jeopardised or paralysed by the hearer's objection: 'So what'? But still life loves the 'so what'. It exactly breaks with narrative's scale of human importance. It shows what it shows simply because 'these things were there'. Its loyalty is to objects, not to human significance. The human subject is not only physically exiled: the scale of values on which narrative and history painting are based is erased also.³⁴

For Bryson, still life is the domain of things, and things, unlike people, are not interested in acts of narration. The it-narratives I discussed in Chapter 1, for one, suggest that this is far from true. At the very least, these stories remind us that the world of things has consistently been a subject of (narrative) fascination for the people it supposedly excludes, perhaps especially when the lines between people and things are at their most blurred. Indeed, we would be better served to forego the notion of a world of things separate from our own altogether. After all, even in the case of still lifes, artists have a habit of inserting self-portraits onto reflective surfaces, that is, of 'trespassing' into the supposedly exclusive territory of things.³⁵ Moreover, as this practice suggests, the 'human scale' analog of the still life is not the history painting, but rather the portrait, which counters the former's "these things were there" with a "she lived." In either genre, narration is not in fact paralyzed by the 'so what' question; it is predicated on it. As Peter Schwenger aptly puts it, "[t]he stillness of still life is always capable of generating narrative motion[.]"³⁶ and, what is more, this capacity to give rise to a sense of change over time seems integral to the still life exercise as a whole.

For example, much of the scholarship on Dutch still life of the seventeenth century—the epitome of the genre—posits that the practice of depicting displays of wealth and plenty is itself a form of meditation on the contemporaneous emergence of, as well as the ethical threat posed by, commodity fetishism. More precisely, Dutch still life is understood to grapple with the pull of the material in a moral climate that

³⁴ Norman Bryson, "Chardin and the Text of Still Life", *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (1989): 227-252.

³⁵ Celeste Brusati, "Stilled Lives: Self-Portraiture and Self-Reflection in Seventeenth-Century Netherlandish Still-Life Painting", *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 20, no. 2/3 (1990): 168-182.

³⁶ Peter Schwenger, "Still Life: A User's Manual", *Narrative* 10, no. 2 (2002): 140-155.

eschews materiality.³⁷ This preoccupation is particularly clear in the case of the so-called *vanitas* still life, which, despite its apparent interest in the materiality of objects, is primarily interested in transitoriness and the metaphysical. Thus its recurring iconography:

A banketje table-piece by Clara Peeters, for example, virtually anthologizes standard allusions to ephemerality (the fly; the burning candle) and eternity (the sprig of rosemary), even if its sweetmeats were not so obviously arranged to suggest the cross and the sacred heart. In 1603, the first known *vanitas* painting by Jacques de Gheyn the Younger (an artist at the heart of Dutch official and even court culture), similarly inaugurated what became a repertoire of stock associations. At their centre was the defining juxtaposition of soap bubble and skull (*homo bulla*); beneath them coins and medals symbolizing, respectively, wealth and worldly renown and, borrowing poetic allusions from the flower's Persian and Turkish origins, the tulip represented as a symbol of death. Other representations, both engraved and painted, emphasized the flower as the essential example of the transient nature of worldly beauty. And in at least one case, a painting of Jan Brueghel the Elder was inscribed with a quatrain spelling out the sombre analogy.³⁸

With these motifs, objects come to represent decay, as opposed to durability. The food on the table will rot; the bubble will burst; the tulip will wilt; and the body will decompose. Material display is temporary—only God is forever.

My interest in this semiotic repertoire is not in theology or metaphysics, however, but rather the recurrent 'move' which this iconographic vocabulary uses to such great effect. I am speaking of the way in which still life references the continuous flow of time through the momentary cessation of it. Here, fixity is understood as an index of process. And the same might well be said of porcelain, especially of porcelain renderings of *yangbanxi liangxiang*—with one crucial caveat. On the one hand, these pieces are constituted by fixity in both time and space, while, on the other hand, they become emblems of a repertoire of set narratives, each possessing a beginning, a middle, and an end. In a sense, then, they do more than index changeability or the general passage of time—and this is where the analogy with still life begins to break down, perhaps—they bespeak change headed in a particular direction. This is not just a matter of process, but of progress and, by extension, of Historical development. As I draw this chapter to a close, I want to focus on the temporal nature of this association. To use Brian McHale's terminology, I am interested in the relationship between

³⁷ Foundational texts for this approach include Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Simon Schama, "Perishable Commodities: Dutch Still-life Paintings and the 'Empire of Things'," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 478-488. For a contrasting opinion, see Elizabeth Alice Honig, "Making Sense of Things: On the Motives of Dutch Still Life", *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 34 (1998): 166-183.

³⁸ Schama, "Perishable Commodities", 481.

narrativity and ‘segmentivity’ facilitated by the *yangbanxi* porcelain figurine, either alone or as a group.

Emplotting History

“Story,” McHale reminds us, “may appear continuous, a ‘flow’ of events, but if one only turns up the magnification high enough, sequence dissolves into the granularity of kernels and catalyzers[...].”³⁹ Determining the ‘correct’ level of magnification to employ is often a question of medium, form, and hermeneutic persuasion. In the case of porcelain statuettes and the poses they so often reproduce, however, the granularity of sequence is all too evident. That is, the structural unit or kernel is ready-made thanks to the form itself. The chief issue is not the identification of the segment, but rather, the ways in which one segment is sutured to another—real, in the case of figurine sets, or imagined, in the case of single pieces—to (re)produce a preexisting *yangbanxi* narrative. With its reliance on this mysterious process of ‘suturing,’ to borrow a term from Film Studies, I would like to suggest that the porcelain statuette also bares an uncommon resemblance to the panel in what Will Eisner has referred to as the “sequential art” of comics,⁴⁰ a medium⁴¹ to which the *yangbanxi* were also adapted—more on this in a moment. Like the porcelain figurine, the comics’ panel participates in a predetermined, formal segmentivity—made all the more concrete, in most cases, by the panel’s rectilinear frame—that nonetheless reads as narration. It is precisely the ability of the self-enclosed segment to beget narrative—implied by still life but fully fleshed out in comics—that I wish to examine more closely now.

For this parallel with comics to be truly productive, however, some further refinements in the character of our narrative segments are required. For one thing, whereas I have been arguing that the temporality of the *yangbanxi* figurine is essentially that of an eternally frozen moment, unlike a *vanitas* still life, the comics’ panel does not necessarily share this characteristic. There are any number of ways an artist might convey movement and duration within a given panel. Consider the use of motion lines or the ordering of speech bubbles.⁴² In such cases, an individual panel might be understood to have narrativity in and of itself and therefore contribute to the production of an overarching narrative in a way in which a *yangbanxi* statuette does not. That is to say, the time of comics need not be restricted to the time of porcelain,

³⁹ Brian McHale, “Narrativity and Segmentivity, Or, Poetry in the Gutter,” in *Intermediality and Storytelling*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan, Narratologia (New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 29.

⁴⁰ Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices of the World’s Most Popular Art Form* (Paramus: Poorhouse Press, 1990).

⁴¹ In approaching comics as a medium, as opposed to a form or genre, I am taking a cue from Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton: Tundra Pub, 1993).

⁴² For many more examples, see *Ibid.*, 60-93.

similarities in the formal spatial segmentivity of the two mediums notwithstanding. To which I respond: true, their respective temporalities need not correspond, but if we look at actual *yangbanxi* comics from the Cultural Revolution, we find that in these cases at least, they usually do.

Crucially, the comics versions of the *yangbanxi* take the form *lianhuanhua* or ‘picture books’ (literally, ‘linked pictures’), not to be confused with *manhua*, from the Japanese *manga*, which more closely approximate the comic strip and the comic book as we know them today. The term ‘*lianhuanhua*’ dates from 1927, though we can trace the picture book’s history back to an album published in 1916, with its dominant format—owing much to the long tradition of vernacular fiction illustration—gelling around 1920.⁴³ Small enough to fit in the reader’s palm, each page of a *lianhuanhua* comprises only one rectangular panel, which typically foregoes the use of speech or thought balloons in favor of a caption above or below the frame. The accessibility and popularity of the emerging form during the Republican period attracted the attention of intellectuals, including, most famously, Lu Xun and Mao Dun, as well as avant-garde artists, hoping to reach the—mostly illiterate—masses.⁴⁴ These qualities also endeared the *lianhuanhua* to the Communist Party, both before and after 1949, as a method to extend its propagandistic reach. After a brief hiatus in the initial years of the Cultural Revolution, publication of *lianhuanhua* resumed in the early 1970s and featured prominently in the reading culture of that decade.⁴⁵ Among the many titles in circulation were, not surprisingly, the *yangbanxi*, which, as a group, employ a style that makes very scant use of techniques, such as motion lines, to provide a sense of duration within a panel. The vast majority of panels, in other words, are “monophase images” that “[arrest] movement at a significant moment in the action,”⁴⁶ that is, they freeze narrative time. In point of fact, they tend to freeze time at the same narrative

⁴³ Kuiyi Shen, "Lianhuanhua and Manhua—Picture Books and Comics in Old Shanghai," in *Illustrating Asia: Comics, Humor Magazines, and Picture Books*, ed. John A. Lent (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 100-101.

⁴⁴ For an overview of this history, see Minjie Chen, "Chinese *Lian Huan Hua* and Literacy: Popular Culture Meets Youth Culture," in *Perspectives on Teaching and Learning Chinese Literacy in China*, ed. Cynthia Leung and Jiening Ruan, *Multilingual Education* 2 (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2012), 157-181; Tie Xiao, "Masereel, Lu, and the Development of the Woodcut Picture Book (連環畫) in China", *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15, no. 2 (2013): <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-04374.2230>>.

⁴⁵ On this reading culture, see Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution* 331-370; Gino Nebiolo, "Introduction," in *The People's Comic Book*, trans. Frances Frenaye (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1973), vii-xvi.

⁴⁶ Kai Mikkonen, "Remediation and the Sense of Time in Graphic Narratives," in *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form*, ed. Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2010), 75.



(139) 一道闪电划破漆黑的夜空, 喜儿借着闪电的亮光, 一阵风似地走进奶奶庙。

Figure 3.3 Xi'er arabesque. Panel from Bao mao nü lianhuanhua chuangzuo zu 《白毛女》连环画创作组, *Bao mao nü* 白毛女 [The White-Haired Girl] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe,) 1972.

junctures as the porcelain statuettes I have been addressing.⁴⁷ The panel in Figure 3.3, for example, shows *The White-Haired Girl's* Xi'er in much the same attitude as she is found on the lamp with which I began this chapter. Likewise, the panels in Figure 3.4 match up with the statuettes in Figure 3.5.

This correspondence suggests that, at least when it comes to *yangbanxi* comics, the success of this mode of narrativity, which employs segments clearly delineated in both space *and* time, primarily relies on acts of juxtaposition—whether explicit or implicit. More specifically, it relies on the interpretive work, undertaken by the reader,

⁴⁷ It goes without saying that the *lianhuanhua* comprise far more panels than the sets of porcelain contain statuettes. This means that while almost all statuettes have a corresponding panel, not all panels have a corresponding statuette.



(147) “你们打死我爹爹又害我，你们逼我进深山受折磨，今日里仇人相见，怎能把你们放过！”喜儿飞身跳下神台，猛向仇人扑去。



(148) 黄世仁、穆仁智象两只受惊的野兽，乱奔乱窜，亡命奔逃。喜儿千仇万恨化为无穷无尽的力量，她从神台上抓起烛台，大步追过去。

Figure 3.4 Xi'er frightens the landlord at the temple. Taken from *Bao mao nü lianhuanhua chuanguozuo zu*, *Bao mao nü*.

facilitated by the ‘gutter,’ the comics’ term for the blank space—and, therefore, narrative time—between panels.⁴⁸ Empty as it may first appear, it turns out that the gutter is full of possibility, the potential links between panels myriad,⁴⁹ and for some at least, the possibilities of the gutter are in fact constitutive of the medium itself—whether it be labeled ‘comics’ or, as in the following case, ‘graphic narrative.’

Normally panel pictures represent clearly distinct moments of an ongoing event that cannot be fully seen. It is crucial to narrativity in graphic narratives, therefore, that the reader-spectator recognize the possibility of alternative consequences between the panels. The space in between, also known as the gutter, is the manifestation of the simultaneous discontinuities of space and time. As a symptom of the spatialized illusion of time, the gutter requires the spectator-viewer to conceive of the meaning of the transition and possibly imagine actions that are not drawn, but which must necessarily take place between the images.⁵⁰

The key, then, is to facilitate narrative possibilities, while nonetheless providing sufficient information through juxtaposition in order to also foreclose potential

⁴⁸ McHale, "Narrativity and Segmentivity, Or, Poetry in the Gutter", 31. For a look at the importance of the gutter for the development of modern comics in the European tradition, see Joyce Goggin, "Of Gutters and Guttersnipes: Hogarth's Legacy," in *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form*, ed. Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2010), 5-24.

⁴⁹ For a description of the most common types of linkages, see McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 60-93.

⁵⁰ Mikkonen, "Remediation and the Sense of Time in Graphic Narratives", 77-78.



Figure 3.5 Statuettes of Xi'er in the temple. Part of an eleven-piece set in the collection of the Jianchuan Museum Cluster, Anren, Sichuan.

'erroneous' narratives as they arise, in a process aptly termed "closure" by Scott McCloud.⁵¹

In the case of *yangbanxi* comics in the Cultural Revolution, closure was overdetermined, guaranteed, on the one hand, by the meticulous process of their creation for both stage and page and, on the other hand, by the ubiquity of *yangbanxi* incarnations in all manner of media, which essentially served to prescribe the inner workings of the gutter and its 'correct' narrative. I have embarked on this foray into the world of comics because it suggests that a similar process was at work in the medium of porcelain as well. In other words, we might regard the space—and narrative time—*between yangbanxi* statuettes as a gutter under similar pressure, such that as a set, either real or imagined, these figures become a concretization of sorts of an opera (or ballet) pared down to its *liangxiang*. That is, one might think of the consumption of these porcelains as a form of emplotment: the viewer/consumer is meant to place the provided segment into a preordained sequence.⁵²

⁵¹ McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 63.

⁵² The power of the linear sequence in the formation of narrative remains a point of contention in comics scholarship. See, for example, Silke Horstkotte, "Zooming in and Out: Panels, Frames, Sequences, and the Building of Graphic Storyworlds," in *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*, ed. Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 27-48. In invoking the notion of the sequence, I do not mean to preclude the possibility of nonlinear connections across narrative segments.

To the extent that consumption comprises interactions between people and things, then it is incumbent upon us to also consider the inverse of this process. To that end, I would like to suggest that while the viewer/consumer is emplotting the statuette within a larger narrative and, therefore, a large temporal frame, so too does the statuette work to emplot the viewer/consumer historically—and Historically—within a similarly segmented understanding of time.⁵³ On the most basic level, I am referring here to a Marxist view of History rooted in progress, but also, significantly, in stages—periods of transition, or temporal plateaux on the path to communism. To paraphrase Susan Buck-Morss, “time’s indeterminacy and openness is colonized,”⁵⁴ and the result is a singular vision of both the present and what awaits beyond it. But in truth, the situation is much more complex than that: to experience socialism is to find oneself in one of these times of great development, on the one hand, and yet simultaneously in a curious stasis, on the other. This is the temporality of utopia, the “forced actualization” of which requires paradise to be deferred to tomorrow, even as it is pursued today.⁵⁵ In the end, there is only this double-bind and the isolated, narrative segment with nothing to suture to and therefore no ‘gutter’ to traverse and impute with meaning. The narrative as a whole—History—is well known, but socialism constitutes one’s limited, predetermined, and unchanging position—one’s circumscribed portion of the greater story. We might think of this as a perpetual, Historical *liangxiang*: arm forever held aloft, eyes forever gazing into the future.⁵⁶

Decoration and Display

And yet, it would be a mistake to overemphasize the sway of History, here, for the Cultural Revolution was too tumultuous to be encapsulated in a single frozen moment or pose. Things changed—quickly. Even if historical progress was stuck in the socialist gear, political winds shifted, and what was once revolutionary became revisionist. As David Holm and Yomi Braester remind us, cultural production—even that considered ‘mere’ propaganda—had a limited life cycle.⁵⁷ Things went out of date and out of style, including objects of domestic consumption like porcelains. If this is surprising, we would do well to note the range of available decorative options within

⁵³ Peter de Bolla speaks of an image being “[drawn] toward history.” I see a complementary process at work on the viewer/consumer here. Peter de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 66.

⁵⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 67.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁶ Note that this is very similar to Alexei Yurchak’s description of the temporality of late socialism in the Soviet Union. See Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁵⁷ David Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Yomi Braester, “The Political Campaign As Genre: Ideology and Iconography During the Seventeen Years Period”, *Modern Language Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2008): 119-140.



Figure 3.6 *Make Revolution, Seize Production*, He Shuigen 何水根, People's Fine Art Publishing House, 1974. Collection of the author.

the sphere of political acceptability. A 1974 poster, calling on the viewer to “take firm hold of revolution and stimulate production” (*zhua geming cu shengchan*),⁵⁸ for example,

⁵⁸ The slogan is in fact one of the “Sixteen Points” (*Shiliu tiao*), issued by the Central Committee on August 8, 1966 and reproduced in *People's Daily* the following day. The “Sixteen Points” was one of the foundational official documents of the Cultural

testifies to both the political feasibility and, I would argue, desirability of such variety. As we see in Figure 3.6, four workers are surrounded by all manner of porcelain pieces. The tea set and covered cup in the lower right-hand corner as well as the tea mugs on the rear display shelf remind us that porcelain can be put to good and practical use. But in truth, these emblems of the quotidian are dwarfed by all the pieces whose company they keep, pieces that appear to be primarily concerned with how they look, rather than how they might be used. There is, in particular, a great preponderance of ornately decorated vases and pots. Each is unique and complex. A revolutionary landscape, still in progress, adorns the huge piece at the center of the poster.

Meanwhile, just below it—obscuring part of our view of the mammoth fish bowl, in fact—is a very different kind of work, one of particular interest to us. The sizable flower vase features, as its central panel, a pair of dancers in the midst of a *pas de deux*. From the pose and costumes, one assumes that it is intended as a nod to the ballet version of *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzi jun*). This image is made all the more remarkable for the way it is framed on the vase. With the exception of this *yangbanxi*-inspired panel—and, one assumes, the hidden panel on the vase's other side—the vase is covered by the very thing it is intended to hold: flowers. And not just any flowers—bright pink peonies. On the surface, this juxtaposition appears uncommonly strange. The floral pattern seems out of place—cluttered and overbearing, something fit for an overstuffed couch in a claustrophobic, bourgeois interior. My point, here, is that this vase, as depicted in this poster, approaches *yangbanxi* imagery and florals as equally accessible. The characters of the *yangbanxi* constitute one facet of the artist's decorative repertoire.

Notably absent from this poster are examples of the art form I have chiefly been discussing in this chapter, namely, porcelain sculpture. Without the pretense of usefulness—not even the minor capacity to hold flowers or carp—figurines may have seemed too on-the-nose for a setting already so preoccupied with practices of display and the pleasures of visual consumption. In addition to the preponderance of decorated and decorative porcelains, one notes, for example, the importance given to display surfaces—the overloaded table in the foreground and the well-stocked glass shelving unit in the back. Indeed, even despite the privileged position afforded to the working artist and her studious onlookers as avatars of (gendered) labor at the center of the poster, there is a fair amount of ambiguity as to where precisely we find ourselves. Is this a studio or a store? A locus of production or consumption? After spending time in Jingdezhen, the early-twenty-first-century viewer will find these questions particularly difficult to answer, since it is exceedingly common today to find artists working away in their tiny shops as they await their next customer. In so doing, they create a scene very much reminiscent of that depicted in this poster, while simultaneously blurring distinctions between the spaces of labor and the spaces of

Revolution. See "Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui guanyu wuchan jieji wenhua da geming de jue ding" 中国共产党中央委员会关于无产阶级文化大革命的決定 [The CCP Central Committee's Decision Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution], *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 [People's Daily] August 9, 1966, 1.

exchange. When considered within the context of the Cultural Revolution proper, it is crucial to note that, whatever this space may be, it is most assuredly not an automated factory floor. Although we might well read into this a tension between the discourses of mechanized modernity and the unlimited potential of the amateur, I want to argue that the ambiguous nature of this space speaks, first and foremost, to the uncomfortable politics of display and the modes of consumption it implies. I would like to further suggest that the inclusion of sculptures amongst the other porcelain works would have made this ambiguity all the more apparent by virtue of the formers' 'purely' decorative status. In other words, porcelain statuettes, absent as they may be, share much of the logic of this poster.

In point of fact, they may not be quite so removed as all that, for this particular poster is attributed to none other than He Shuigen, a well-known figure in Jingdezhen, then as now. In this poster, He depicts a world with which he is intimately familiar. As a painter of porcelain, He Shuigen had doubtless spent innumerable hours in the very same attitude as the young woman in the picture. But what He was most recognized for was not ornamental fish bowls—his recognized expertise was in the application of color to porcelain sculptures, specifically in the use of overglaze pigments and enamels (*youshang cai* and/or *jiacai*). During the Cultural Revolution, He was most closely associated with the production of sets of porcelain statuettes depicting the *yangbanxi* at Sculpture Factory. His nine-piece collaboration with Zeng Shandong, recapitulating the tale of *The White-Haired Girl*, is particularly well regarded even today. Given all this, the lack of such sculptural pieces in He's pictorial ode to revolutionary porcelain production seems more than mere oversight. Rather, it reads as symptomatic of the effort to negotiate the allure of 'bourgeois' aesthetic consumption—that is, the praxis of taste—through a denial of representation. I discussed a similar denial and/or displacement with regard to record players in the previous chapter and will therefore refrain from repeating the mechanics of this process here. Instead, I wish now to focus more closely on what is being elided and why, as opposed to how.

It seems to me that, once again, the key in this regard is the non-value or, more precisely, the refusal to acknowledge the (use-)value of display—and by extension the decorative—even as one engages in it oneself.⁵⁹ For we know that, just as porcelain figurines continued to be produced despite their questionable politics, the display of wealth and commodities remained a common retailing and propaganda practice throughout the Mao period, including the Cultural Revolution, as a way to demonstrate China's material prosperity, i.e. modernity. From the photo spreads of bustling department stores, overflowing with goods, in *China Pictorial* to the carefully curated exhibits at the annual export fair in Guangzhou, the Party was no stranger to the potential uses of even the most apparently transgressively capitalist forms of display. But these display practices, exemplified by the paradigmatic shop window—

⁵⁹ The cultural capital produced and enacted through display is an altogether different question. Indeed, it is safe to say that this remained a motivating factor for individuals as well as the PRC, as an international player, to continue to engage in acts of display, both large and small.

large socialist retailers often had window displays⁶⁰ —are, in the final analysis, as much about looking as it is about showing.⁶¹ The act of display itself may have been justified in the name of a socialist modernity rooted in production, but issues of consumption and the visual stimulation of consumer desire was never wholly left behind. I submit that one is not possible without the other, for this, I believe, is ultimately the rub: display a commodity, even if only as an index of modernity, and see that commodity transform into something unwieldy and promiscuous in newly discomfiting ways. Moreover, like the commodity whence it comes, this new something begins to reorganize its surroundings in mysterious ways—both spatially and, crucially, temporally.

Commodity Time

On the face of it, the capitalist commodity in the window seems to act as an ode to consumption as such, suggesting an obliteration of any particular, individual commodity's use-value. As an exercise in eliciting desire, the attending properties of the commodity in the display become merely incidental to the larger glorification of the act of consuming and, by extension, of exchangeability and exchange-value. Put another way: the desire to consume and, presumably, to possess the commodity in the window has more to do with the exchange-value of that commodity and, therefore, the very possibility of exchange on which notions of consumption and possession are predicated than the uses to which that commodity might be put. As a result, we might well suggest that the transformation effected through display is, in this case, something akin to a reification of exchange-value. However, this explanation itself leaves something to be desired, as it were, for in emphasizing the commodity's exchange-value, it threatens to overlook the mechanisms through which capitalist consumer desire and attention are directed. These remain unquestionably tied to the material specificity of the commodity in question. There is, for example, most assuredly an aesthetic component to display, which remains operative, whatever its intended purpose. There is something altogether too constricting about this account of display under capitalism, then, let alone in the context of socialism, 'really existing' or otherwise.

Instead, we would do better to take a page from Walter Benjamin, for whom "the key to the new urban phantasmagoria was not so much the commodity-in-the-market as the commodity-on-display, where exchange value no less than use value lost practical meaning, and purely representational value came to the fore." The strictures

⁶⁰ Indeed, Karl Gerth notes that China held its own window display conference in 1959. Gerth, "Compromising with Consumerism in Socialist China", 229.

⁶¹ For a fantastic genealogy of the modern, European and North American shop window and its shifting mode(s) of visibility, see Rachel Bowlby, *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 49-78. See also Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

of Marxist political economy give way to a philosophy of representation whereby “[e]verything desirable, from sex to social status, could be transformed into commodities as fetishes-on-display that held the crowd enthralled even when personal possession was far beyond their reach. Indeed, an unattainably high price tag only enhanced a commodity’s symbolic value. Moreover, when newness became a fetish, history itself became a manifestation of the commodity form.”⁶² The question for us becomes the extent to which Benjamin’s insights into the commodity-on-display are helpful in articulating the peculiar goings-on of the socialist shop window in addition to those of the Paris arcades.

This is not a minor concern. After all, there is a strong argument to be made in which the socialist act of commodity display takes on a radically different set of (explicit) political valences: commodity production, rather than commodity consumption, is purportedly the motivation for displays of plenty as indirect celebrations of labor. As the conflation of spaces of production and spaces of consumption in the He Shuigen poster (discussed above) makes clear, however, the singular emphasis on production is maintained with great difficulty, if at all. I would contend that this is because the ultimate motivation for production remains the improvement of living standards as measured by consumption. To the extent that this is the case, the socialist window display constitutes a production-ist/developmental alibi for consumer desire. As such, two of Benjamin’s observations regarding the capitalist commodity-on-display remain particularly relevant to us here: First, to the extent that the transformative process of display involves reification, it is, above all, the reification of representational value. And second, this process is inextricably linked to the conceptualization and representation of history/History, a terrain ostensibly controlled during the Mao period by the CCP. Allow me now briefly to address both of these points in turn in relation to the Cultural Revolution.

The initial observation that the commodity-on-display raises questions of representation and representability as much if not more than economics seems especially relevant to the (Chinese) socialist context, that is, where the disconnect between representations of material plenty and the lived experience of scarcity was felt very acutely. The department store display did not necessarily jibe with what was actually available on the shelves—whether one could afford any given commodity or not—such that the overwhelmingly representational nature of commodity display was a well recognized fact. Consider the minority shoppers on the frontier mentioned in the previous chapter: over and over again they appear on the pages of China’s official pictorials browsing elaborate arrays of commodities—commodities that likely never made it outside large urban areas in the absence of photographers. Just as there was a recognized gap between the page and that which it purported to represent, so too was there a recognized gap between the commodity-on-display and the commodity itself. Representational gaps related to commodities had to be negotiated as a matter of daily life. Chen Ruoxi’s short story “The Big Fish” (*Da qingyu*) in fact hinges on this discrepancy: it describes an entire Potemkin village-like market, staged for the benefit

⁶² Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 81-82.

of foreigners and overflowing with produce. When the story's protagonist attempts to take advantage of the rare opportunity to purchase a fish for dinner, it is confiscated from him as he leaves.⁶³ The tactics of socialist shopping were myriad⁶⁴, and the successful consumption of commodities was directly tied to knowledge of both the workings of the system and the value of technologies and modes of representation.

That the commodity-on-display should be tied to the production of representational value appears, in the abstract at least, to have little troubled the socialist project in and of itself. Indeed, as I have just suggested, it was consistently put to official use. Where this quality began to cause problems was in relation to the questions of class distinctions and time. The mechanisms of class distinction in relation to commodity consumption — representational or otherwise — are well known,⁶⁵ and they help account for the persistence of material class differences, even during a period such as the Cultural Revolution.⁶⁶ From the CCP perspective, class distinctions indicated the necessity for continued class struggle and revolution. One might well focus one's critical energy on a particular class, classist practice, or material manifestation of class — including bourgeois knickknacks, for example — but to rail against the existence of classes under socialism was nowhere on the agenda. Things became significantly dicier in the related matter of the temporal effects of the commodity-on-display, which clearly butted up against the orthodox Marxist understanding of History and the CCP's role in it. Consider the issue of (women's)

⁶³ Chen Ruoxi 陈若曦, "Da qingyu" 大青鱼 [The Big Fish], in *Zhongguo xiandai duanpian xiaoshuo xinshang cidian* 中国现代短篇小说欣赏辞典 [Dictionary of Modern Chinese Short Story Appreciation], ed. Wang Jiren 王纪人 (Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian chubanshe, 1992), 973-984; For an English translation, see Ruoxi Chen, "The Big Fish," in *The Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories From the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*, ed. Howard Goldblatt, trans. Nancy Ing (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 126-138.

⁶⁴ This has been an area of increased scholarly interest, especially as it pertains to the experience of socialism in Eastern Europe. Ina Merkel's work on the German Democratic Republic was crucial in breaking this new ground in the late 1990s. See, for example, Merkel, "Consumer Culture in the GDR". Jos Gamble has endeavored to compare socialist and post-socialist consumer behavior in China in relation to transnational retailers' management and training practices. See Jos Gamble, "Consumers with Chinese Characteristics? Local Customers in British and Japanese Multinational Stores in Contemporary China," in *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 175-198. In a very different vein, recollections of the Mao period, including the Cultural Revolution, often describe the lengths to which individuals had to go to acquire commodities. This is a recurring theme, for example, in *Some of Us*.

⁶⁵ See, most famously, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁶⁶ Much of the history Yiching Wu traces in his recent book is precisely concerned with the persistence of class in its many incarnations. See Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins*.

fashion, which, as Antonia Finnane and Tina Mai Chen have both indicated, remained a very contested field after the Communist takeover in 1949 and well up to Mao's death in 1976.⁶⁷ Fashion's obsession with the new—which for Benjamin is nonetheless always the same—and the consequent concern with being *au courant* create a peculiar temporality that, like the commodity that produces it, takes on the mystical properties of the fetish. Peter Osborne's reading of Benjamin articulates this point evocatively and is worth quoting at length:

As objects of fetishization, commodities destined for everyday consumption display two closely related features: one is their apparent self-sufficiency or independence from their processes of production; the other is the appearance of novelty, required to make them attractive in the face of competing products. [...] In the first case, it is the constitutive power of labour, and hence the social relations of mutual dependence, which is the object of fetishistic disavowal. In the second case, it is both the standardization of the commodity and the corrosive effects of time (aging, death) which are acknowledged only through their negation. In its fetishization of novelty, Benjamin argued, fashion "tirelessly constitutes 'antiquity' anew out of the most recent past." It thus constantly leaves its objects behind as "outmoded," reinforcing their independence, and thus their quality as fetishes, *before they have been exhausted by experience* [original emphasis]. In their fetishized but outmoded independence, these objects thus come to subsist, their novelty sealed up inside them, like time capsules. Signifiers of socialized desire (the desire for the new), they are resistant to the self-negating side of novelty (its invariance), by virtue of their very redundancy. In an extraordinary dialectical reversal, the outmoded becomes the privileged site for the experience of novelty, and hence futurity itself.⁶⁸

The chief concern for the CCP was that futurity and the future were not meant to be up for grabs; indeed, socialist orthodoxy clearly established that only one future was ultimately possible—communism. Moreover, the road to the communist utopia was itself also mapped out. History would develop along a fixed path, and it was China's good luck to find itself advanced to the transitional stage of socialism—with a little help from the political vanguard, of course. Although revisionism was understood, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, as a real threat to historical progress, the eventual accomplishment of the developmental goal was never in doubt, nor was it up for debate. The temporality of the commodity-on-display as described above also posits a notion of progress—each new novelty must be better than the last—but it is, from the perspective of a Marxist understanding of historical stages, progress that leads nowhere. The temporality of fashion—and, I would add, interior decoration—is so

⁶⁷ Tina Mai Chen, "Dressing for the Party: Clothing, Citizenship, and Gender-formation in Mao's China", *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 5, no. 2 (2001): 143-171; Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

⁶⁸ Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-garde* (London: Verso, 1995), 184.

troublesome precisely because it lays claim to a notion of development while, in fact, maintaining the status quo. Put another way, it contends that spinning one's wheels in the bourgeois muck constitutes forward revolutionary momentum.

This clash of temporalities is not without precedent. As Buck-Morss argues with regard to the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s, the fight to conceptualize History and its future trajectory had far-reaching consequences, including what amounted to the eventual cooptation of the artistic avant-garde by the political vanguard and the dominance of socialist realism under Stalin.⁶⁹ The argument I am making here is not quite so straightforward, if only because the tension between the future that was guaranteed by Marx and its eternal deferment appears to have produced a sense of time that was very much analogous to the notional temporality it ostensibly opposed. While the commodity-on-display may not have been acting as an engine of progress, the time of revolution was similarly stalled. Nowhere is that analogous nature—and the overlap of alternative Histories/histories it facilitated—clearer than in the porcelain statuettes of the Cultural Revolution I have addressed in this chapter: epitome of both the commodity-on-display and the paradoxically frozen time of revolution.

⁶⁹ Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* 42-69.

Chapter 4: Remediating the Hero: Transformation and Alienation in Amateur Performance

On the last page of its April 14, 1974 issue, the national newspaper *Liberation Daily* (*Jiefang ribao*) republished a well-known image from the early years of the Cultural Revolution. The caption identifies the small black-and-white illustration as the reproduction of a 1968 propaganda poster painted by Shan Lianxiao, who, in accordance with the usual practice of the time, is identified as a worker. The reason for the image's return to prominence here is found in the figure of the young woman in the upper right-hand corner: with her single, long braid, clenched fist, and red lantern, she is instantly recognizable as Li Tiemei, the quintessential revolutionary successor. As one of the heroes of the model opera *The Red Lantern* (*Hong deng ji*), Tiemei was thrust back into the center of the political stage in 1974, when the *yangbanxi* were once again vigorously promoted throughout the official media, this time as powerful weapons in the campaign to criticize Lin Biao and Confucius (*pi Lin pi Kong*) (1973-4).

Despite her iconic status, however, Tiemei is not alone in capturing the viewer's attention here. Indeed, backed by a red flag and hovering weightlessly in an ill-defined space, Tiemei is contrasted with the presence of the larger, more grounded, young woman dominating the lower half of the image, identifiable by her armband as a member of the militia. Gazing off toward the same future communist utopia and holding her left elbow at the same angle, the militia woman is presented as Tiemei's 'real life' double. Tiemei's fist is offset by a rifle, and whereas Tiemei raises her red lantern, symbol of her revolutionary inheritance, her counterpart wears a Mao badge and clutches a copy of *The Selected Works of Mao Zedong* (*Mao Zedong xuan ji*), complete, strangely, with a pink bow. It is the interplay between the two women—now exact duplicates, now complementary—that drives this poster, as the eye of the viewer moves along the diagonal they form, an axis additionally delineated by the flag's white pole and the book's edge. A line of text also graces the image's left side: "Be this kind of person" (*zuo ren yao zuo zheyang de ren*), it asserts, putting an end to any confusion about who in Mao's China is worthy of emulation.

But if the inclusion of the slogan is meant to put any argument to rest, it paradoxically raises a whole host of new questions, exploding the poster's otherwise clearly demarcated frame. Many of these questions arise from the ambiguous nature of the demonstrative determiner 'this.' If the image is concerned with imitation or mimesis—an assumption to which I shall return momentarily—just who is imitating whom? Surely, the poster is first and foremost addressing the viewer, calling on her to fall into line and act as the young militia woman does. The issue, however, is that the militia woman is not in and of herself a fixed point or stable entity; her importance, as we have seen, derives from her relation to and imitation of Tiemei. As it turns out, however, Tiemei is not all that self-enclosed a figure either. The poster's tagline is, in fact, the title of one of Li Tiemei's arias in *The Red Lantern*, marking an important step in her journey to fully assuming the revolutionary mantle. The "this kind of person" she is referring to is her (adoptive) father, Li Yuhe, who himself makes repeated references to what a generic 'Communist' does and can withstand. In other words, even the heroic figure of Li Yuhe is, in a sense, a mere cipher, an isolated instantiation



Figure 4.6 *Be This Kind of Person*, Shan Lianxiao 单联孝, People's Fine Art Publishing House, 53cm X 77cm, 1974.

of a generalized and generalizable revolutionary ideal. In the end, it is Chairman Mao who emerges: it is his name that Li Yuhe shouts on the execution ground and his likeness and words that rest so close to the militia woman's heart.

This attention to Mao's status (and presence in the poster) as master signifier within the Cultural Revolution's system of signification is not to deny the importance or impact of figures like Li Tiemei and Li Yuhe. On the contrary, it is to suggest that the importance of such figures derives precisely from their participation in chains of signification that draw their power from the Red Sun himself. They operate as intermediaries between the individual and the fount of discursive power, i.e. Mao. But whereas Mao necessarily remains singularly unmatched in his position of semiotic supremacy—there can be only one Chairman Mao—the *yangbanxi* heroines and heroes are eminently reproducible—the more the merrier. Indeed, this is arguably their main purpose as 'models' of idealized revolutionary behavior. The question then becomes how this mass (re)production—or 'remediation'—is supposed to take place. Put another way, what kind of process does one undergo to 'mold' oneself into "this kind of person"? A distinction must be drawn here between emulation, imitation, and mimesis, on the one hand, and 'becoming,' on the other, for it is quite pointedly the latter that this poster asks of the viewer. Don't just 'play' the revolutionary; don't simply mimic her. *Be* her.

This chapter examines a key technology of this mass (re)production and remediation of revolutionary models: amateur performance, as carried out in the context of the *yangbanxi* popularization campaign (*dali puji yangbanxi*) officially begun in July 1970. I focus primarily on the discursive construction of performance as a transformative process through which revolutionaries can be (re)made. Critical to this construction is the attention given to the amateur's body and embodied voice, the technology's relevant 'media.' Crucially, this is a technology rooted in a conception of the amateur body as 'plastic' and further predicated on a fantasy of perfect identity between the molding of the body and the molding of the person as a whole, between 'appearance' and 'essence.' The greater the attention paid to the standardization of performance, however, the more one detects an underlying anxiety that the faith in the absolute correspondence between bodily training and ideological self-fashioning has been misplaced. I argue that this anxiety, bound up in the figure of the villain and what I call a Cultural Revolution 'hermeneutics of suspicion,' is also evocative of an ever-present spectral figure in Marxist thought: the alienated worker under capitalism. To the extent that the utopian promise of communism is freedom from alienation—of one's labor, of one's body, of one's self—the promise of amateur performance lies not just in the (re)production of heroes, but in a concomitant (re)integration of the subject. But if the products of this technology of amateur performance are idealized for their completeness and stability, paradoxically, the technology itself undermines that very possibility by invoking the notion of the plastic amateur body as one medium among many (porcelain, painting, television, film...the list goes on). The amateur body is, like the body of the professional star in this regard, implicated in a system of remediation and representation, and as a result, it takes on a sense of abstraction and exchangeability that is reminiscent of the capitalist commodity form. To be an amateur performer not only involves molding oneself into a hero, a model established through the 'consumption' of authoritative representations and prescriptive discourse, but also the rendering of one's body 'consumable' and, therefore, alienable.

Amateur Performance

The ideal functioning of amateur performance as a technology of mass (re)production is captured by the short story, "Before and After the Performance" (*Yanchu qianhou*), by Shi Ning, which surrounds the aforementioned image in *Liberation Daily*. Narrated by Sister Afang, an amateur portrayer of Li Tiemei in a northeastern propaganda team (*xuantuandui*), the piece follows the development of Honghua (literally, 'red flower'), as she transitions from avid fan to Li Tiemei performer to lead actress and head of her local propaganda team. This evolution is established through flashbacks of Sister Afang and Honghua's first two meetings. Although Sister Afang has been dispatched by her brigade commander to go learn from Honghua's troupe in the story's present, this is a reversal of their original relationship. When the women first meet five years earlier, it is Sister Afang who performs and Honghua who watches with rapt attention (and in the freezing cold, no less). Having walked for miles to see the performance, she is unable to get a ticket and is forced to watch through a window with a crowd of peasants. Sister Afang is so moved by Honghua's love of the *yangbanxi*

that she has the performance moved outside, where everyone can have a better view, and insists on singing despite being ill. As Honghua begins her long journey home after the show, she is heard singing “Be this kind of person” (*zuo ren yao zuo zheiyang de ren*).

When the women meet again two years later, they are both performing as part of a special evening of entertainment for an important visitor. Calamity strikes when Sister Afang realizes that she has misplaced her braid, an integral part of the Li Tiemei costume, the loss of which threatens to derail the performance before it has even begun. Without a second thought, Honghua cuts off her own beloved braids—she has had them for eight years—affixing one to Sister Afang’s head and thereby allowing the show to go on. This gesture is understood by everyone as a great personal sacrifice for the good of the dissemination of the *yangbanxi*. Indeed, Honghua says as much in a speech that results in Sister Afang’s best ever performance. The story ends in the present with Honghua portraying Jiang Shuiying, the much-lauded heroine of *Song of Dragon River* (*Longjiang song*) on an impromptu stage. The audience, which includes Sister Afang, is duly impressed, everyone rushing to learn from Honghua upon the completion of her performance.¹

Honghua’s apparent linear trajectory from student to teacher is combined here with a circularity typical of Cultural Revolution rhetoric, if not Maoist rhetoric in general. Even as Honghua watches from the sidelines—indeed, she finds herself literally on the outside looking in—it is she, not Sister Afang, who has the most ardent revolutionary spirit. It is Honghua who consistently inspires Sister Afang, not the other way around. One might say, therefore, that the story’s structure mirrors that of Mao’s famous dictum “from the masses, to the masses” (*cong qunzhong zhong lai dao qunzhong zhong qu*). As with this slogan, however, circularity here does not imply stagnation; there must, after all, still be progress. And this is precisely where Honghua’s development from spectator to performer and her increasingly revolutionary behavior become so crucial. In Honghua’s evolution lies the promise of our own.

The engine of her development is the performance of Li Tiemei and other *yangbanxi* heroines. Performance is rendered transformative, with the expectation that one will, in a sense, ‘become’ the hero one portrays. This attitude is neatly summed up by Honghua’s grandfather, who is rather unsurprised by his granddaughter’s donation of braids for the glory of the *yangbanxi*. “Yes,” he says, “Chairman Mao’s propagandists (*xuanchuanyuan*) should act this way!”² The underlying logic behind this naturalized expectation is subsequently articulated by an unnamed peasant onlooker in the story’s present, impressed with Honghua’s versatility in embodying whichever heroine she happens to be playing at the time. “When she plays a hero, she learns from that hero, and when she learns from that hero, you see it in her actions.”³ The

¹ Shi Ning 施宁, “Yanchu qianhou” 演出前后 [Before and After the Performance], *Jiefang ribao* 解放日报 [Liberation Daily] April 14, 1974, 4.

² My translation. Ibid.

³ My translation. Ibid.

discerning peasant, here, ventriloquizes and expands on a common slogan in the discourse surrounding amateur performance: “Play a hero, study a hero, see it in the actions” (*yan yingxiong, xue yingxiong, jian xingdong*).⁴ This progression effectively explodes the notion of the stage as delimiting a space within which one can and should appropriate the behavior and mannerisms of a hero or heroes. The goal is rather to mold oneself into a hero in everyday life.

The official media outlets were only too happy to report on instances in which the transformative promise of *yangbanxi* amateur performance had apparently been borne out, thereby propagating a new crop of models who travelled effectively between on and off stage. The propaganda teams of Shanghai’s Number Four Benefit the People Food Products Factory (*Yimin shipin si chang*) (hereafter, Yimin Factory) were some of the most prominent of these models. Articles describing their achievements quite commonly found their way into the pages of Shanghai’s major daily, *Wenhui bao*, as well as the national *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao*). When members of Shanghai Normal University’s Chinese department put together a volume lauding the amateur performances and performers of seven worker, peasant, and soldier work units in 1975, Yimin Factory was given pride of place.⁵ The exploits of the performers in the collection are varied: increased production, better work unit morale, the successful reform of problematic persons in the work unit, the creation and development of new works, etc. In the best tradition of *yangbanxi* heroes, these model amateurs are said to overcome great difficulties in order to carry out their tasks, such as wading through frigid water and performing in challenging conditions. It is perhaps no surprise that the performers apparently went to such lengths, when their actions were attributed with near magical powers to set both minds and bodies aright.

They [the Yimin Factory propaganda teams] also performed for workers’ families, bringing the revolutionary spirit of the revolutionary *yangbanxi* to the families of workers in the factory. They once specially performed and sang revolutionary *yangbanxi* [arias] for a worker’s relative who had been bedridden for many years due to paralysis. This comrade, moved to tears, said, “It goes without saying that in the old society, no one would have come here to comfort

⁴ This slogan is sometimes shortened to only the first two terms of the triptych—“play a hero, study a hero”—drawing on the notion of ‘study’ (*xue*) as itself a kind of embodiment, which has a very long history, traceable all the way back to *The Analects* (*Lunyu*). Interestingly enough, this abridged saying is also occasionally inverted, becoming instead an adage about proper performance practice: “study a hero to play a hero.” In this reversability, we once again find the circularity characteristic of Maoist discourse.

⁵ *Yizhi changdao gongchanzhuyi: Gongnongbing puji geming yangbanxi diaocha baogao* 一直唱道共产主义：工农兵普及样板戏调查报告 [Singing All the Way to Communism: Investigative Report on the Popularization of *Yangbanxi* by Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers], ed. Shanghai shifan daxue Zhongwen xi gongnongbing xueyuan diaocha xiaozu 上海师范大学中文系工农兵学员调查小组 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1975).

and perform for a disabled person (*canjiren*) like me; it was hard to even stay alive then. I must take the heroic characters as my models (*bangyang*) and struggle with this disease, so that I can soon return to health and work for the revolution.”⁶

Since no recovery is recorded, however, one assumes that even the *yangbanxi* had their limits.

Provincial level newspapers likewise touted local exemplars of ‘real life’ heroes forged through amateur performance of the *yangbanxi*. *Sichuan Daily* (*Sichuan ribao*) offered a most dramatic account of the fruits of this process to its readers with the case of Ma Zilan. As part of its commemoration of the thirty-second anniversary of Mao’s *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature* (*Zai Yan’an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua*), the May 23, 1974 issue of *Sichuan Daily* included a number of articles pertaining to *yangbanxi*. The most theoretical are articles also found in *People’s Daily* on the same day, but the rest describe the state of *yangbanxi* popularization in Sichuan proper. Things were reportedly going swimmingly in Dengzhan Commune, where efforts were led by amateur propaganda teams. It is in the seventh brigade’s team that we find Ma Zilan, who, after performing the revolutionary heroine on stage, braves a burning building off stage. Climbing onto the roof alongside her male comrades, Ma does not hesitate to put herself in harm’s way to quell the flames; indeed, she is injured when the roof collapses. But she is undaunted by her wounds when she hears the cries of a young child, going into the fire to save it. This harrowing account is then juxtaposed with figures concerning the number of propaganda team members who have successfully joined the Party.⁷ The message is clear: the (proper) performance of *yangbanxi* can propel individuals into the pantheon of revolutionary figures, themselves worthy of reproduction, whether they be firefighters or bureaucrats.

This focus on everyday, ‘real life’ heroes aids us, perhaps, in refining our understanding of what precisely is meant by ‘amateur,’ for, as Ellen Judd notes, the concept is rather difficult to pin down. In general, of course, we tend to understand the ‘amateur’ as one who engages in a particular activity without remuneration, i.e. in addition to their trade or employment. This understanding is explicit in the Chinese term I have here been translating as ‘amateur’: *yeyu*, literally, ‘in addition to work.’⁸ We should note that, throughout the decade from 1966 to 1976, revolution was meant to go hand in hand with increasing industrial output, as the slogan “take firm hold of revolution and stimulate production” (*zhuo geming cu shengchan*), appearing on the poster discussed in Chapter 3, makes clear. Indeed, since the very beginning of the *yangbanxi* popularization campaign in 1970, great emphasis was placed on the fact that

⁶ My translation. *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁷ Chen, “Yanzhe Mao Zhuxi de geming wenyi luxian shengli qianjin”, 3.

⁸ For a discussion of amateur theater in China from 1949 to 1966, see Colin Mackerras, *Amateur Theatre in China, 1949-1966*, Contemporary China Papers (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 1973).

production was not to be adversely affected.⁹ The campaign to popularize the *yangbanxi* was to take place during the participants' free time.

It should come as no surprise, however, that this depiction of the amateur—hardworking machinist by day, opera performer by night—did not always jibe with what was happening on the ground. The continued touring required of the Yimin Factory performers, for example, left little time for work on the factory floor, meaning that these individuals may therefore be said to have essentially been living off their art.¹⁰ It was also common for nominally amateur groups to include or be advised by individuals who had been members of professional troupes up until the Cultural Revolution. After all, professional song and dance and opera troupes may have 'disbanded' in great numbers after 1966, but in many cases, they were simply reinvented in more politically acceptable forms, including those of amateur status. Educated, urban artists sent to the countryside were likewise recast as talented, amateur peasants.¹¹

The term 'amateur' is therefore incredibly elastic during this period, and this elasticity is fundamentally a function of political desirability. Whereas the professional operates on the basis of her formal training, which leaves her uncomfortably close to bourgeois priorities and hierarchies, the amateur succeeds by virtue of her ideological fervor.¹² This is the amateur's political cachet: her motives are clearly borne out by her actions. Moreover, the amateur never achieves mastery of her area of interest; she is and forever will be a student of the masses. This is precisely Sister Afang's position with respect to Honghua in "Before and After the Performance." As the latter moves from spectator to performer to teacher, the former's position as eternal student is further cemented. There is always more to learn; one can always be better. Just as the *yangbanxi* are rendered more and more perfect with every subsequent round of revision, the amateur performer is forever perfecting her art—and through it, herself.

This is the essence of the notion of performance as transformation, a formulation that was ultimately neither restricted to the *yangbanxi*—though, as the pinnacle of the socialist performing arts, they were understood as the most effective tools with which to bring about the desired transformation—nor applicable only to actual amateurs. In transforming themselves into off-stage heroes alongside firefighting brigade team leaders, professionals, too, could lay claim to amateur status. As Xiaomei Chen points out, a number of the professional performers of the *yangbanxi* rose to

⁹ See, for example, "Zuohao puji geming yangbanxi de gongzuo" 做好普及革命样板戏的工作 [Carry Out the Work of Popularizing the Revolutionary Yangbanxi], *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 [People's Daily] July 15, 1970, 1.

¹⁰ See Ellen Judd, "China's Amateur Drama: The Movement to Popularize the Revolutionary Model Operas", *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 15, no. 1 (1983): 26-35.

¹¹ For many examples of this, see Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*.

¹² These associations explain the push in 1972 and 1973, when Premier Zhou Enlai was in a relative position of power vis-à-vis Jiang Qing's radical faction, for individuals to be both 'red' and 'expert' (*you hong you zhuan*).

political prominence, becoming not simply the portrayers of model heroes, but “model actors” in their own right.¹³ As with the amateur performers, “[i]t was believed that by acting out the roles of revolutionary characters—that is, by creating the revolutionary other while rejecting the nonrevolutionary self—the actors would be reformed and shed their bourgeois ideology. In concentrating on every body movement and perfecting every operatic tune, the players of the model operas rechanneled their energies toward a revolutionary ideal.”¹⁴ But whereas professionals were relatively few in number, (potential) amateurs were everywhere. The great promise of the amateur performance movement was one of scale: heroes could be mass (re)produced. Through performance, China could truly become a nation of Li Yuhes and Jiang Shuiyings.

‘Becoming’ and the Logic of Remediation

As we have seen, this desired transformation required and produced the blurring of distinctions between on and off stage. In light of this and the importance of performance as an intellectual paradigm in contemporary thought, it is perhaps not surprising that the *yangbanxi* and their position of prominence in everyday life during the Cultural Revolution have typically been approached from this vantage point. Xiaomei Chen, for example, concludes her chapter on “operatic revolutions” thusly: “Acting the ‘right’ part—a course of action that reached its perfection with the dramatic characters in model theater—became a commonplace in contemporary China that affected everyone’s behavior, both in the public and in the domestic spheres. Dramatic performance became something that Chinese people could not do without in the highly politicized—and hence, theatrical—world they inhabited.”¹⁵ Ban Wang makes a similar point: “Through the constant reproductions of the plays and widespread immersion in them, the people no longer just performed the dramas and acted out the roles on the stage: they came to live these roles and act out the scenarios in daily life. They came to identify with the heroes, taking on the tone, pitch, and manner of their speech and assuming their bodily postures. They even gesticulated and moved in the same heroic and theatrical way.”¹⁶ Both scholars seek to address the ‘theatricalization’ of the Cultural Revolution quotidian by essentially arguing that the disintegration of the stage as a distinctly defined, performative space resulted in the extension of the performative logic of the theater to all corners of society. Life, here, is said to have imitated art, as opposed to the reverse,¹⁷ or even to have become art *tout court*.

¹³ Xiaomei Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 120.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 120-121.

¹⁶ Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 214.

¹⁷ Chen, *Acting the Right Part* 93.

As Teri Silvio has suggested, however, this “performance paradigm” tends to emphasize issues of identity/identification and the construction of a ‘self’ in relation to and as a product of a role or roles. Questions concerning the relationship between person and object—or person and ‘thing,’ for that matter—therefore often fall by the wayside.¹⁸ Such questions seem particularly crucial to any discussion of the *yangbanxi*, as their revolutionary protagonists appeared not just on stage, but in nearly every conceivable medium, many of which I have discussed in this dissertation. These heroes could be seen on both small and big screens; their likenesses found their way onto every surface, from mirrors to plates to biscuit tins; their voices could be heard endlessly over loudspeaker and radio. It is within this context that amateur performances of the *yangbanxi* took place in the 1970s, and as a result, it is incumbent upon us to ask how amateur bodies and embodied voices fit into this environment of extreme intermediality and saturation. As an analytical frame, performance alone does not seem to get at this question. This is the logic of ‘remediation.’

As defined in the most restrictive sense put forth by Bolter and Grusin, remediation is “the representation of one medium in another.”¹⁹ Therefore, we might think of the *yangbanxi* films as remediations of theater or the *Shajiabang* symphony as a remediation of the opera. One quickly finds, however, that the linear progression from one medium to another implied in Bolter and Grusin’s most basic definition of remediation is problematic in the context of the *yangbanxi*, if not generally. It becomes increasingly difficult to pinpoint the directionality of the remedial process: is the image of Li Tiemei in Shan Lianxiao’s poster a remediation of the stage? Of television? Of photography? Of comic books? The poster pre-dates the film version of *The Red Lantern*, but in the 1970s, it would likely have been experienced as a remediation of the movie. Rather than rely on this narrow understanding of remediation, then, I turn to Bolter and Grusin’s own expansion of the concept, as when they suggest that, in a sense, “all mediation is remediation” because “[m]edia need each other in order to function as media at all.”²⁰ Ultimately, remediation operates not as a series of vectors from one medium to another, but as a system of media, perpetually defining themselves in relation to one another and the production of the ‘real’ as itself a form of (re)mediation. Thus, when considering the amateur performance of *yangbanxi* through the lens of remediation, the most pertinent question is not “What media are being remediated by amateur bodies in this particular instance?” so much as “How are other media being invoked in the construction of amateur bodies as a medium in its own right?”

One of the key media in this regard is sculpture, invoked most directly, perhaps, in the operatic practice of *liangxiang* or ‘striking a pose,’ mentioned briefly in the previous chapter. At their most emblematic, revolutionary heroes are completely motionless, temporarily transposed into the realm of statuary. As Paul Clark notes, this

¹⁸ Teri Silvio, “Animation: The New Performance?,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2010): 422-438.

¹⁹ J David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

propensity towards the striking of poses, and the formation of tableaux via this practice, was by no means restricted to the *yangbanxi*; rather, it was also a technique favored by Red Guard performers in the early years of the Cultural Revolution. In at least one instance, the connection between this performative mode and sculpture was rendered quite explicit. “In late May 1967, rebel factions at the China Musical and Dance Theatre and the China Youth Art Theatre joined forces to present *Rent Collection Courtyard* (Shouzuyuan). This showed remarkable intertextuality, as the ‘Rent Collection Courtyard’ was a group of sculptures created in 1965 in Sichuan to illustrate peasant suffering in the ‘old society.’”²¹ From the point of view of remediation, we might suggest that such a development was not so remarkable at all, merely the natural culmination of a commonly employed remedial association. Indeed, in an indication of just how interconnected the various prominent media of the Cultural Revolution were—and, therefore, how important a systemic understanding of media and remediation is—the “Rent Collection Courtyard” sculptures were, from the beginning, crafted based on live models striking ‘sculptural’ poses.²² The work also made its way onto celluloid and, perhaps most implausibly, onto vinyl, when the film soundtrack was released as an LP in 1966.

In the case of the pantheon of *yangbanxi* heroes, it was their stationary poses that traveled amongst all manner of artistic media. We might understand this phenomenon in terms of what Marc Steinberg calls “dynamic stillness” and the “dynamic immobility of the image.” Steinberg’s point of interest is anime’s media mix, in particular its origins in character merchandizing practices related to *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan atomu*). He argues that “it is precisely the dynamic stillness of the image that allows limited animation to generate movement across media forms. [...] Stilling the movement of animation allows the anime image to connect with other media forms, expanding in the 1960s toward the Japanese media mix.”²³ Steinberg places considerable emphasis on the way in which anime, as a form of limited animation, is the product of both motion and immobility. Anime characters move against stationary backgrounds; cels are regularly repeated. As a result, anime is predicated on a notion of “dynamically immobile” images, which are easily transferrable to other media precisely because of their ‘fixed’ quality.

Steinberg’s insights into the functioning of the media mix as it pertains to issues of stillness and intermediality are instructive insofar as they help conceptualize the movement of characters—in this case, revolutionary heroes—across media. In their theatrical form, the *yangbanxi* are also invested in “dynamic stillness” with their dramatic, ideologically weighty use of *liangxiang*, most instances of which exhibit the hero or heroes’ determination and defiance. If characters are physically stationary when they strike their poses, they are by no means removed from the ongoing tensions

²¹ Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution* 194.

²² For more on the work’s creation, see Britta Erickson, “The Rent Collection Courtyard, Past and Present,” in *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-76*, ed. Richard King (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 121-135.

²³ Marc Steinberg, *Anime’s Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 6.

and progress of the plot—and by extension, History. Rather, their stillness is felt as intensity, intensity that propels the character(s), and the work as a whole, forward once the *liangxiang* is broken.²⁴ One might suggest, building on Steinberg, that this intensity also fuels the dynamism of the immobile *yangbanxi* image as well.

As I discussed in Chapter 3, these *liangxiang* were reproduced in the form of porcelain statuettes, at least some of which were made at Sculpture Factory in Jingdezhen, the center of high-end porcelain production. It turns out that the making of these statuettes, which requires first the sculpting or ‘molding’ of the clay and its subsequent vitrification in the kiln,²⁵ is a rather apt metaphor for the idealized transformative process of amateur performance: the body and embodied voice of the amateur performer first assume (or are made to assume) the form of the revolutionary icon; then, through the act of performance—itsself a substitute for the flames of revolution—they undergo a kind of transubstantiation, becoming literally the stuff of heroes.

Indeed, this link between the performance of *yangbanxi* and sculpture is rendered even stronger by the consistent use of the word ‘*suzao*’ when describing the process of crafting revolutionary heroes on stage. As Judd makes clear, the prescriptive performance theory of the Cultural Revolution evolved and was fleshed out over time. It was fully articulated by the mid-1970s, when the notion of the so-called ‘three prominences’ (*san tuchu*)—emphasize the positive characters over the negative, the heroic among the positive, and the single most heroic among these—was combined with the ‘basic task’ (*genben renwu*) of socialist art, that is, to *suzao* “proletarian heroic types/images/characters (*dianxing/xingxiang/renwu*).”²⁶ We may well be tempted to simply translate *suzao* as ‘to create’ here, as Judd does, but the Chinese has a decidedly sculptural connotation to it, as it can mean both to ‘mold’ a substance, especially clay, into a representative figure and, by extension, to portray a character in the theater or craft a character in writing. The successful *suzao* of heroes in the *yangbanxi* was said to be one of their most significant victories; every tool at the creators’ disposal had been used in this endeavor, and the importance of the continued optimal *suzao* of these same heroes became the central concern of discourse on amateur performance. Amateurs had a responsibility to *suzao* these by-definition flawless characters as best as they possibly could.

To the extent that amateurs were, in fact, *suzao*-ing or ‘molding’ revolutionary icons, the medium at their disposal was ultimately themselves: their bodies, their voices, and, ideally, their entire beings. They were aided in this process by a number of tools,

²⁴ For more on the narrative potential of *liangxiang* and their relationship with conceptualizations of time and History, see Chapter 3.

²⁵ Depending on the technique used, color is added under the glaze, prior to the first and only firing; over the glaze, after the first firing but before the second; or, very occasionally, directly on the biscuit.

²⁶ As translated in Ellen Judd, “Prescriptive Dramatic Theory of the Cultural Revolution,” in *Drama in the People’s Republic of China*, ed. Constantine Tung and Colin Mackerras (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 95.



Figure 4.7 Yang Zirong, hero of *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhiqu weibushan*), 25.5cm. Collection of the Jianchuan Museum Cluster, Anren, Sichuan.

not the least of which were the endlessly repeated and definitive professional performances disseminated over loudspeaker, radio, television, and, finally, film. The *People's Daily* editorial that marked the official beginning of the popularization campaign on July 15, 1970 makes a point of noting the usefulness of such representations, along with the written experiential accounts of professionals. "In order to study the revolutionary *yangbanxi* well, one must diligently study the scripts, performance recordings, and related television documentaries of the revolutionary *yangbanxi*, as well as introductions to the creation of the revolutionary *yangbanxi* and essays on the experience of performing them, published in newspapers and periodicals."²⁷ Even as performance and how-to guides proliferated as the Cultural Revolution progressed, the purported perfection of the officially distributed *yangbanxi* performances continued to provide the most important models in whose image amateurs were to remake their characters and themselves. The proper use of these representations was put forth by accounts of the difficult—but ultimately always fruitful—learning process, like that of Ma Xiaode, whom I first mentioned in Chapter 2.

In order to promote the *yangbanxi* well, Ma Xiaode, a member of the third brigade's propaganda team, would spend his free time every day, morning, noon, and night, sitting in front of the radio or broadcast [loudspeaker], singing along word for word or, after watching a *yangbanxi* film, practicing each

²⁷ My translation. "Zuohao puji geming yangbanxi de gongzuo", 1.

individual movement. He often practiced until his mouth and tongue were dry and his waist and legs ached. Sometimes, he would practice late into the night, without any thought of resting. After a period of this kind of diligent study and bitter rehearsal, he was finally able to portray Yang Zirong, Guo Jianguang, Li Yuhe, and other heroic characters quite well, after which he received acclaim from the masses.²⁸

While even the singing guides ultimately deferred to the aurally and visually instructive power of professional performances,²⁹ this did not stop the publishing houses from churning out all manner of performance manuals, specifying staging, properties, set design, costumes, and gestures and dance steps—not to mention the scripts, of course. Scores were also published in various formats, the most common of which only includes the vocal line of the main arias, but full scores and instrumental/percussion scores were also available.

The aforementioned singing guides—some specifically for *yangbanxi* and some for singing in general, with a preponderance of examples from *yangbanxi*—made sure to teach how to sing ‘scientifically.’ Xiao Congshu’s *Introduction to the Fundamentals of Learning How to Sing Revolutionary Modern Peking Opera* (*Geming xianandai jingju changshi jieshao*), for instance, includes a number of anatomical diagrams illustrating the head’s resonant cavities and the correct positioning of the soft palate and tongue in order to produce the desired timbre.³⁰ Sound production, resonance, and amplification are presented as biological phenomena subject to bodily control. This is a vocal pedagogy deeply invested in the demystification and harnessing of sound as the outcome of a physiological process. Moreover, it is clear that this physiological process is normalized in such a way as to promote a desirable and consistent standard, especially with regard to pronunciation. While there is an acknowledgement that everyone will be different at the beginning of the pedagogical endeavor—speakers of some southern dialects may have trouble distinguishing *si* from *shi*, for example—everyone should nonetheless be able to reproduce the standard correctly once the training is complete. On top of everything else, the revolutionary hero must be a model for *putonghua*, the ‘common’ language; Maoist ideals must be communicated with perfect *shis*, *zhis*, and *chis*.³¹ Bodies were thus standardized as the physiological creators of sound and, by extension, the disseminators of a national language. For their part, how-to guides for accompanying instruments, like the *jinghu*, also worked to standardize instrumentalists’ bodily movements as well, but the accompanist is significantly instructed to pay close

²⁸ My translation. Chen, "Yanzhe Mao Zhuxi de geming wenyi luxian shengli qianjin", 3.

²⁹ See, for example, Xiao Congshu 肖从曙, *Geming xianandai jingju xue chang changshi jieshao* 革命现代京剧学唱常识介绍 [Introduction to the Fundamentals of Learning How to Sing Revolutionary Modern Peking Opera] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1975), 54.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The ‘transplantation’ (*yizhi*) of *yangbanxi* into regional opera forms did occur; indeed, it was encouraged as a way to interact with the masses more closely. I am speaking here of the standardized *jingju* versions of the operas.

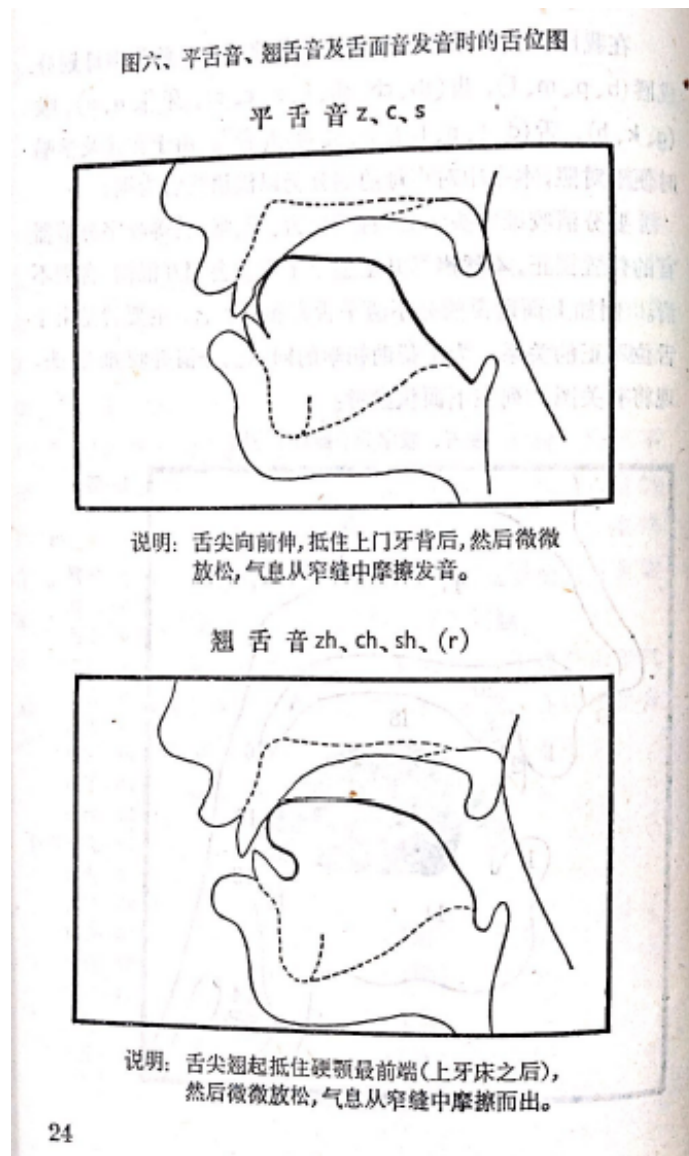


Figure 4.8 Anatomical diagrams for correct pronunciation. Xiao Congshu 肖从曙, *Geming xiandai jingju xue chang changshi jieshao* 革命现代京剧学唱常识介绍 [Introduction to the Fundamentals of Learning How to Sing Revolutionary Modern Peking Opera] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1975), 24.

attention to the singer's physiological needs in addition to the particularities of her own, a testament to the ultimate primacy granted the vocalist.³²

This discursive emphasis on the amateur body and the embodied nature of the amateur voice is in keeping with a notion of performance as a transformative

³² Since both these guides and the *yangbanxi* vocal scores make use of *jianpu* notation, we would also be justified in including manuals for learning such notation within the discursive sphere concerning amateur performance.

technology, which is itself predicated on the assumed plasticity of bodies and individuals. Ban Wang identifies this basic premise as critical to the promulgation of repetitive revolutionary ritual.

The revolutionary rituals appealed to our senses and inner psyches, to our desires, and they worked on the surface of our bodies. They functioned on a cynical premise about individual human beings—on the supposition that the individual's mind and body are malleable, amenable to modeling and shaping by the sensuous medium of a ritual. A person's emotion is capable of being modified and re-educated; one's aesthetic taste and unconscious cravings can be trained, altered, and then pushed in the service of the authoritarian order.³³

Whereas Wang describes 'ritual' as a medium, I would argue that, from the perspective of remediation, it is the malleable individual—who actively molds herself—that is the medium of note here; ritual, like performance, is simply the mechanism through which this molding is carried out or undermined. Moreover, the operating assumption here is not simply that the mind and body are both plastic, but rather, that the shaping of the latter will necessarily result in the perfectly corresponding shaping of the former, that one can "endlessly reform one's worldview (*shijieguan*) as part of the performance process."³⁴ This is the logic of 'thought reform through labor' (*laogai*) as it is the logic of amateur performance of the *yangbanxi*: if the body (and voice) are molded in the likeness of a revolutionary paragon, the rest will follow.

The power attributed to the notion of performance as a technology of transformation accounts for the discursive investment in the standardization of that process, but only in part. We might better understand the growing emphasis on the 'proper' way to perform the *yangbanxi* as indicative, on the one hand, of the precarious position of the model performances' staunchest supporters, i.e. Jiang Qing and what would become the Gang of Four, and a testament to a sneaking suspicion that this much-vaunted technology was perhaps not so effective after all, on the other. In keeping with the porcelain metaphor, we might call this underlying unease the 'fear of the misfire,' that is, the concern that the transmutation effected in the kiln goes awry in some way. In the context of amateur performance, the most problematic of 'misfires' are, in fact, not so much the imperfectly shaped reproductions of the model heroes (e.g. amateurs singing out of tune), so much as those cases in which vitrification is incomplete: clay and glaze are not fused and transmuted into porcelain; despite all hopes and outward appearances, the amateur playing the hero remains just that, an individual *playing* a hero, rather than *becoming* one. 'Appearance' (*waibiao*) and 'essence' (*benzhi*), to use two watchwords of Cultural Revolution performance theory,³⁵ fail to

³³ Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History* 217.

³⁴ My translation. "Zuohao puji geming yangbanxi de gongzuo", 3.

³⁵ See, for example, Tao Youzhi 陶友之, "'Yiyang' yu 'bu yiyang'--tan xianxiang he benzhi" "一样"与"不一样"—谈现象和本质 ["Alike" and "Unalike"--On Appearance and Essence], in *Xue yangbanxi, tan bianzhengfa* 学样板戏, 谈辩证法 [Study the

line up as they should. But the greatest difficulty here lies precisely in trying to tell the difference between the two processes, in recognizing the misfire if and when it occurs—thus the increasing attention paid to the standardization of performance practice, staging, costuming, properties, etc. For despite the unsettling notion of a disjuncture between the molding of the body and the concomitant shaping of the individual as a whole, the former still remains the preferred way to facilitate the latter. Faced with the possibility of failure, the only recourse here is, paradoxically, to double down on efforts at molding the body ‘correctly,’ since that can still be at least partially controlled.

But failures we know there were. In a duality that extended beyond the stage and into daily life, appearances could often be deceiving. “Although nobody dared say so in public, among trusted schoolmates or family frustration with the empty rhetoric and meaningless idealism was frequently expressed. A certain tone in singing an aria from one of the model operas, a certain flick of the head in exaggerated parody of one of the central heroes, a clever rewording of a well-known verse could provide an outlet for a largely unspoken but shared sense of the ridiculous.”³⁶ In light of such behavior, it is no wonder that the cultural authorities used every tool at their disposal to standardize such parodic renditions and exaggerated head ‘flicks’ into oblivion. That they did not succeed in doing so should not be surprising: extreme standardization—or what Alexei Yurchak calls “hypernormalization” in the late Soviet period³⁷—has a nasty way of producing new discursive spaces of the very kind it is meant to eradicate.³⁸ Even more insidiously, as I argue below, the persistence of this gap between ‘playing’ and ‘becoming,’ which proved so productive for unofficial and counter-discourses, was in fact rooted and embodied in the oft-neglected figure of the villain within the *yangbanxi* repertoire itself.

The Saboteurs in Our Midst

Despite the fact that much if not all of the glory of the *yangbanxi* is invariably directed at the heroes—and would-be heroes who play them—the performances are not designed to be one-woman or one-man shows. Among the structural tools used to *suzao* the main heroic character of each work is their juxtaposition with other characters, who are dwarfed—sometimes literally—by the comparison. The starkest contrast is, of course, provided by the figure of the class enemy.

The negative characters were invariably class enemies, for the most part officers of the Japanese or Nationalist armies or spies. They were few in number, as it was an essential feature of this theory that the positive and heroic

Yangbanxi, Discuss Dialectics], ed. Gong Xueli 巩旭黎 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1974), 32-37.

³⁶ Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* 259.

³⁷ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*.

³⁸ Barbara Mittler also reminds us of the enduring polysemy of ‘propaganda’ of all sorts during the Cultural Revolution. See Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution*.

characters must predominate, but their presence was important for both political and dramatic purposes. They were politically necessary because class struggle was at the core of every proletarian drama even if its main line of dramatic conflict lay in the realm of contradictions among the people. [...] The theory prescribed that the negative characters be created with the primary purpose of revealing the virtues of the hero(in)es, especially the main heroic character. The qualities of the negative characters were of no other interest or purpose in proletarian drama. In order to ensure strong dramatic conflict, the negative characters should be formidably bad, but must not distract attention from the heroic characters, to whom they must give way and whose characterization they must serve to develop.³⁹

In the terms of Maoist discourse, we might say that the villain primarily served a dialectical purpose: he—the villain is consistently male—is the antithesis to the hero's thesis; synthesis notably requires them both. But the requisite villain had to be of a rather peculiar type: despicable and cunning enough to put up a good fight, yet never so much so that the triumph of good over evil ever really be in doubt.

This balance was difficult to achieve but critical to the *yangbanxi*'s propagandistic agenda, lest the works be consistently 'misread.' It was thus one of Jiang Qing's chief concerns and criticisms of an early version of *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhiqu Weibushan*) when she addressed the conference on Beijing operas on contemporary themes held in the capital in 1964. The villain of the piece, Vulture (Cuoshandiao), overshadowed the hero, Yang Zirong, from the work's very inception, prompting a series of revisions in Shanghai before the conference began. But Jiang Qing remained dissatisfied with these changes, pointing out that Vulture's scenes were essentially untouched during this process, a fact Jiang attributes to deference to the considerable talent of the man playing Vulture, He Yonghua. To truly emphasize the heroic characters, He's performance had to be reigned in; Vulture had to become less remarkable in his villainy.⁴⁰

Jiang's preoccupation with Vulture's stature and his position vis-à-vis Yang Zirong is perhaps best understood in the context of the 1958 novel on which the opera was based, Qu Bo's *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* (*Linbai xue yuan*), and its subsequent film adaptation, both of which appear to have caused some worrisome reactions amongst readers and viewers. According to Ding Lin, a teacher at the Beijing Number Two Experimental Primary School, children were especially vulnerable to Vulture's charms. Ding asserts that children have a "strong propensity towards imitation" (*qianglie de mofangxing*) such that they often reproduce teachers' words and actions as well as

³⁹ Judd, "Prescriptive Dramatic Theory of the Cultural Revolution", 100.

⁴⁰ Jiang Qing 江青, "Tan jingju geming--yijiuliusi nian qi yue zai jingju xiandai xi huanmo yanchu renyuan de zuotanhui shang de jianghua" 谈京剧革命——一九六四年七月在京剧现代戏观摩演出人员的座谈会上的讲话 [On the Revolution in Beijing Opera--Talks at the July 1964 Conference on Peking Operas on Contemporary Themes], *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 [People's Daily] May 10, 1967, 1.

fictional character traits in their games and lives.⁴¹ The child emerges here as the malleable learner/viewer/listener *par excellence*, the quintessential amateur performer, as it were. The playground is her stage, as she reenacts what she has seen and heard. But if this is the promise rooted in the figure of the child, Ding Lin reports that in the case of *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* things have gone horribly wrong: instead of mimicking Yang Zirong as they should, the school's pupils are playing at being the bandits, reproducing their idiosyncratic language and behavior.⁴² The reason? The villains have too many strange tics, tics that both mask the evildoers' reactionary 'essence' and attract the children's attention. By contrast, the heroes are as bland and uninteresting as can be. In short, the villains are simply too cool, too much fun to play at. The result is ultimately the overshadowing of the protagonist and the inversion of the intended ideological message. This, in a nutshell, is the propagandist's worst nightmare, and though no amount of restructuring and revision could ever completely foreclose this kind of unsanctioned reaction, every attempt was made to restrict the villain's role to essentially that of a foil, a contrastive figure who would not attract any undue attention outside of his dealings with the hero.

This was somewhat of a departure from 'traditional' opera, or, at the very least, was pegged as such by Beijing opera revolutionaries. Gone were the villains one could love to hate; such sentiments were too complex for the increasingly Manichean understanding of the world promoted by official organs as of the mid-1960s. As one can imagine, this made life difficult for actors who had made a name for themselves playing exactly what was now to be avoided at all costs, namely, memorable, larger-than-life villains. For the famed Yuan Shihai, who was perhaps best known for his portrayal of the historical villain Cao Cao, learning how to act the villain in a modern opera was essentially a new enterprise, one he finally 'mastered' on his third attempt with Captain Hatoyama (Jiushan, in Chinese) in *The Red Lantern*. Yuan describes his ultimate breakthrough as follows:

I [eventually] understood that, when playing a negative character, one should analyze the character's reactionary essence (*benzhi*) from a proletarian perspective; one must possess hatred for the negative character in order to depict (*biaoxianchu*) the negative character's cruel and ruthless reactionary essence. And, most importantly, one must always remember that the purpose of depicting negative characters is to heighten the establishment of the positive characters.

[...] Hatoyama is a vicious, cruel character, who has treachery in his heart but thinks himself beyond reproach. He dons a sincere, kind, and worldly exterior (*waibiao*), but he cannot fully conceal his irascible, empty, and weak nature (*benxing*). These factors add up to his being the spitting image of a paper tiger. Thus, when I am playing this character, in my heart (*xin li*) I have the following

⁴¹ Ding Lin 丁林, "Women de gongtong zeren" 我们的共同责任 [Our Common Responsibility], in *Bi tan Lin hai xue yuan* 笔谈《林海雪原》 [On *Tracks in the Snowy Forest*] (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1961), 26.

⁴² Ibid.

refrain: I must carve (*kehua*) his 'all bark, no bite' (*selineiren*) reactionary essence.⁴³

Within the context of Yuan's self-described epiphany, the acknowledgement of Hatoyama's second-tier status vis-à-vis the positive characters comes off as a simple restating of a categorical, official mantra. This is particularly so because of the apparent difficulty with which Yuan attempts to explain his creative process. Whereas the relationship between positive and negative characters is provided without any hint of equivocation, the rest of his account lacks such definition; here, he ties himself into rhetorical knots.

At issue is the disjuncture between essence (*benzhi*) and outward appearance (*waibiao*). Hatoyama, as a character, is said to be defined by a radical lack of correspondence between the two—which is itself, paradoxically, also described as his essence. He acts one way, but *really* is something else: he seems kindly but is vicious; he seems ferocious but is weak. As it turns out, this duality is a trait commonly found in *yangbanxi* villains; indeed, it is part of what makes them so nefarious. Huang Shiren in *The White-Haired Girl* and Nan Batian in *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijun*) purport to be 'good' Confucians despite their heinous crimes. The American imperialists in *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment* (*Qixi Baibutuan*) say they want peace on the Korean peninsula while planning their next attack. The villains of the works set during the socialist period are arguably even more two-faced. Huang Guozhong in *Song of Dragon River* and Qian Shouwei in *On the Docks* (*Haigang*), for example, both reveal themselves to be class enemies hidden in plain sight amongst the masses. Faced with this kind of foe, for their part, the revolutionary heroes further distinguish themselves by not falling victim to the villains' carefully crafted facades. While everyone else is fooled or even led astray by the enemy in their midst, the heroine sees him and his acts of sabotage for what they are, i.e. an instance of class struggle. The inevitable unveiling of the villain in all his despicableness is one of the hero's chief tasks, and it is made possible by a kind of preternatural discernment, carefully attuned to the underhanded tricks of the wolf in sheep's clothing.

This exceptional ability to see someone for what he or she *really* is was one of the many things the *yangbanxi* were supposed to model and teach. This critical skill is described by Tao Youzhi as "penetrating appearance to see the essence" (*touguo xianxiang kan benzhi*), which itself is predicated on distinguishing between "false appearances" (*jiaxiang*) and "true appearances" (*zhenxiang*). As ever, the key here is the relationship between appearance and essence, when they correspond and when they do not.⁴⁴ Tao's attempt at a characteristically dialectical explanation is worth quoting at length.

⁴³ My translation. Yuan Shihai 袁世海, "Tantan zhengque di duidai biaoyan fanmian renwu" 谈谈正确地对待表演反面人物 [On the Correct Approach to the Performance of Negative Characters], *Wenhui bao* 文汇报 October 4, 1965, 4.

⁴⁴ Note that this language and the concerns it is used to articulate are remarkably similar to those found in political economic analyses of the socialist commodity-form in

[E]ssence and appearance are two different sides of the objective developmental process of things. Essence refers to a thing's nature and internal relations, and appearance is a thing's external form, which we can perceive. Essence cannot be separated from appearance, and appearance cannot be separated from essence. Essence must be reflected via appearance; any appearance is the external manifestation (*biaoxian*) of essence. From this perspective, essence and appearance are mutually related and unified. However, essence and appearance are also distinct, mutually contradictory, and mutually opposed. As essence is stored in a thing's interior, it is relatively stable, but as appearance is revealed on a thing's exterior, it is relatively changeable. That with which people can directly make contact is a thing's appearance. Moreover, appearance may be categorized as true appearance and false appearance. The former directly illustrates some aspect of the thing's essence, while the latter is the distorted and inverted manifestation of essence.⁴⁵

Fang Haizhen, heroine of *On the Docks* and Tao Youzhi's paradigmatic example of what a discerning proletarian should be, is not fooled by these momentary distortions and inversions of the villain Qian Shouwei's capitalist essence. Indeed, Tao goes so far as to suggest that this ability to 'penetrate appearance' is, in fact, part and parcel of Fang Haizhen's proletarian "worldview" (*shijieguan*).⁴⁶ Thus, taking a revolutionary stand is equated here with what I call a Cultural Revolution 'hermeneutics of suspicion': although there is a belief in and a desire for a direct correlation between what a person 'is' and what she 'appears' to be, one must always be on one's guard, prepared for those instances in which 'false appearances' might rear their ugly heads.

There were, after all, an inordinate number of 'class enemies,' hidden in the very last place one would think to look during the Cultural Revolution, including at the Great Helmsman's right hand. It is most fitting, then, that Tao Youzhi should end his 1974 essay with a discussion of Lin Biao, as someone who, like Qian Shouwei, attempted to hide his treacherous inclinations but was ultimately found out by some perspicacious comrades. The average individual, in molding herself into a Fang Haizhen—through amateur performance, perhaps—is called upon to develop this perspicacity, this hermeneutics of suspicion, on which she can draw to ferret out the Qian Shouweis and Lin Biaos in her own everyday life. But this is easier said than done, for as much as the *yangbanxi*, and officially endorsed readings of them, try to persuade us that the shadowy world of the hidden class enemy and his corollary, the undercover hero, might all be neatly squared away,⁴⁷ the hermeneutics of suspicion they themselves promote would seem to foreclose that possibility. Appearance and essence are continuously wrenched apart by the simple act of interrogating their connection.

which the commodity's largely unchanged appearance is said to mask a radically new essence. For more on this, see Chapter 1.

⁴⁵ My translation. Tao, ""Yiyang" yu "bu yiyang"", 33-34.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁷ Judd, "Prescriptive Dramatic Theory of the Cultural Revolution", 112.

The implications of this hermeneutics of suspicion for the notion of performance-as-transformative-technology are therefore very great indeed. It would seem to guarantee the ‘misfires’ the process is so keen to avoid by maintaining the gap between appearance and essence consistent with ‘playing’ the hero, as opposed to ‘becoming’ one. In truth, the disruptive power of the villain is even more pronounced in this regard by virtue of the modifications to the performance-cum-technology his portrayal requires. Whereas the mass (re)production of heroes is an eminently desirable state of affairs, the notion of (re)producing class enemies right alongside them is considerably less so—though it may remain, as we shall see, a dialectical necessity. In the case of the villain, then, ‘misfires’ are in fact the goal; the transmutational process is to be intentionally sabotaged, as it were. The actor Yuan Shihai’s discussion of how to play Hatoyama (quoted at length above) is instructive here insofar as he establishes distance between his essence and that of the Japanese captain. Yuan does not ‘mold’ or *suzao* Hatoyama in the medium of his own body, as amateurs are called upon to do when portraying heroic figures. Rather, he renders harsh proletarian judgment on Hatoyama even as he plays him. This is not so much a case of performance as a straightforward technology of transformation as it is a ‘real life’ invocation of the trope of the undercover revolutionary. If there were a patron saint of villain-portrayers, it would be Yang Zirong, who manages to remain every bit the ardent Communist even when he enters the villain’s lair in disguise.

This means, of course, that a full, amateur staging of a *yangbanxi* would ideally feature two conceptualizations of performance—as ‘becoming,’ in the case of the hero, and resolutely ‘not becoming,’ in the case of the villain—side by side. The need to discern which was which was not hypothetical; this was a tension at the heart of the discourse on amateur performance, confronting individuals on a daily basis. One fairly obvious way of ameliorating the situation was simply to push the villains off stage. Full stagings and even staged excerpts were more difficult to perform, requiring considerably more resources than the presentation of a series of triumphant arias, for example, and were, accordingly, the exception rather than the rule. Villains appear to have been given decidedly limited stage time beyond that, lacking any rip-roaring arias of their own. They are likewise conspicuously absent from official accounts of amateur performances; the figure of the villain is too unsettling to allow onto the pages of *People’s Daily* and *Wenhui bao*. Better to whitewash him out of existence.

Try as one might, however, the *yangbanxi* villain cannot be eradicated, only displaced, for he remains a dialectical necessity: the heroes cannot be heroic without adversaries to vanquish. Bumped unceremoniously off the amateur stage, we find these villains in the form of the constantly invoked, nameless throng of ‘enemies’ (*diren*) said to oppose the popularization of the *yangbanxi* at every turn.

The enemies of the proletariat fear the revolutionary *yangbanxi* to death and will hate them to their last. [...] First, they went all out, besieging, cursing, disparaging, and sabotaging; they openly attacked, saying the revolutionary *yangbanxi* were not good. Their frontal attack was quickly decimated by the high level of political and artistic success of the revolutionary *yangbanxi*. Later, they tried in vain to weaken the great political educational power and artistic

affective potential of the *yangbanxi*. Some bad people went so far as to use the masses' love of the revolutionary *yangbanxi* to their advantage, upholding the banner of "performing the revolutionary *yangbanxi*," in order only to distort, tamper with, and sabotage the revolutionary *yangbanxi*. This is a tendency in the class struggle on the literary and artistic front that is worthy of our serious attention.⁴⁸

This 1969 *Red Flag* (*Hongqi*) editorial, reproduced in *People's Daily*, goes on to enumerate some of these attempts at sabotage, the most spectacular of which involve intentionally 'improper' stagings of the works. Despite the nebulous nature of the rank and file 'bad elements' in society responsible for such performances as described by the official press,⁴⁹ their 'crimes' are quite specific: men playing women and vice versa; the reliance on feudal costumes and ornaments even when depicting revolutionaries; the reintroduction of love interests excised from earlier versions; and the use of "make-up, costumes, sets, properties, music, gestures, and choreography to spread the base flavor of capitalism and feudalism, to distort the revolutionary *yangbanxi*."⁵⁰ The perpetrators of these improper acts are the most dangerous of class enemies. They do not attack head on and in plain sight; rather, they infiltrate and corrupt from within. They perform the *yangbanxi* but do so in such a way as to undermine their status as proletarian models of the arts and mass technology of (heroic) (re)production. By meddling with precisely those aspects of performance the official discourse is so at pains to standardize, the omnipresent class enemy has the wherewithal to throw the whole system out of kilter.

It is nonetheless the case that the class enemy is also crucial to that very same system. As unsavory as it would have seemed to the cultural authorities at the time, the (re)production of villains was just as important (if not more so) to the Cultural Revolution enterprise as the (re)production of the heroic masses. The promotion of the *yangbanxi* as the dominant repertoire of the period was often carried out in the name of fighting back against the most high-ranking public enemy at any given time. This was the case when the works first rose to prominence in the years from 1967 to 1969, when former president Liu Shaoqi was the chief target. The surge in writings about the *yangbanxi* of 1973 and 1974 also coincides neatly with the campaign to "Criticize Lin

⁴⁸ My translation. Zhe Ping 哲平, "Xuexi geming yangbanxi, baowei geming yangbanxi" 学习革命样板戏 保卫革命样板戏 [Study the Revolutionary Model Works, Protect the Revolutionary Model Works], *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 [People's Daily] October 19, 1969, 2.

⁴⁹ As I have argued elsewhere, the lack of specificity should not necessarily be understood as a failure to deliver a particular propagandistic message. On the contrary, in some cases, vagueness can in and of itself be used as a rhetorical tool. In this instance, the 'enemies' of the *yangbanxi* are potentially so broadly construed as to be anyone and everyone, which is precisely the point. See Laurence Coderre, "Counterattack: (Re)contextualizing Propaganda", *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 4, no. 3 (2010): 211-227.

⁵⁰ My translation. Zhe, "Xuexi geming yangbanxi", 2.

Biao, Criticize Confucius," as does the case with Tao Youzhi's essay, discussed above. Finally, in 1976, as the Gang of Four began to attack Deng Xiaoping, defending the *yangbanxi* was used (unsuccessfully, it would seem) as a rallying point once again.⁵¹ These highly publicized foes notwithstanding, however, just as the amateur performance of the *yangbanxi* was meant to produce heroes *en masse*, it had to produce enemies for them to defeat on a similarly large scale. Like their brethren on stage, these enemies had to be adept at hiding their true 'essence' and were necessarily revealed for what they were by a new crop of heroes, fresh from the metaphorical kiln of performance, well versed in the Cultural Revolution hermeneutics of suspicion. Until, that is, more enemies were 'produced' out of necessity, repeating the cycle *ad infinitum*. Such is the characteristically circular rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution.

But what kind of subjectivity is even possible in a world filled with endless, potential saboteurs and 'misfires'—that is, in a world where 'appearance' is always threatening to detach itself from 'essence'? What happens to the relationship between the subject and her body, the most obvious manifestation of appearance? In the remainder of this chapter, I want to suggest that the anxiety about distinguishing 'misfires' from 'successful' instances of transformation through performance and, by extension, hidden class enemies from honest revolutionary heroes is in part a function of the amateur performer's relationship to her own body. 'Detachable' appearances all too easily translate into alienated bodies, bodies that ultimately participate in a larger system of (re)mediation and economy of representation. As a medium defined in relation to other media, plastic bodies, molded into heroic characters, become abstract and exchangeable signifiers whose promiscuity is such that the amateur's body does not 'belong' (exclusively) to her. Indeed, just as the molding of the amateur body is facilitated by the 'consumption' of representations of the professional star's body, so too is the amateur body itself rendered 'consumable' in its media(ted) form. The mass (re)production of heroes also means the mass 'consumption' and alienation of amateur bodies.

Unitary Subjects and Promiscuous Characters

From a Party organizational perspective, the promise of performance as a technology of transformation is the (re)production, on a national scale, of quintessential revolutionary heroes in everyday life. Such figures were desirable, I would argue, not just because of their unimpeachable Communist credentials and unquestionable (and unquestioning) devotion to Chairman Mao. The supposition that

⁵¹ The inaugural March issue of *People's Theater* (*Renmin xiju*), for example, includes a series of six articles, all written by professional actors, Yuan Shihai among them. Over and over again, the authors assert Deng Xiaoping's opposition to the *yangbanxi* and all that they represent. See "Jianjue huiji wenyijie youqing fan'an feng" 坚决回击文艺界右倾翻案风 [Resolutely Counterattack the Right-Deviationist Wind to Reverse Correct Verdicts in the World of Literature and Art], *Renmin xiju* 人民戏剧 [People's Theater] no. 1 (1976): 10-18.

persons and bodies could be molded into perfect alignment meant that the amateur performer, turned *yangbanxi* hero, could achieve a kind of wholeness in which her body and being were fully integrated the one into the other. The revolutionary hero embodies this aspiration. Li Yuhe is what he does and does what he is: he is always as revolutionary as he seems and never deviates from his nature. Appearance and essence are equated to the point of being synonymous and interchangeable. In short, the *yangbanxi* hero is everything that our porcelain metaphor demands him to be: one contiguous and homogeneous substance all the way through. This constitution renders a person's 'essence' visible, that is, accessible and legible, to those in power, and precludes the possibility of obfuscation and double-dealing. Such things are the purview of the *yangbanxi* villain, who nonetheless lurks where we least expect it. But whereas the villain thrives on the disjuncture between appearance and essence, the hero is the guarantor of their commensurability. One should note that the appeal of the idealized amateur as such is very much in keeping with this idea, that is, that she lacks the power (and propensity) to obfuscate that expert training would provide. Instead, she wears her revolutionary fervor on her sleeve, in such a way that her naïveté also guarantees the correspondence of essence and appearance. To 'become' the hero through the process of performance, then, not only means transforming oneself into the epitome of revolutionary perfection, but also of achieving (and/or maintaining) a radical unity of being.

In his wholeness, I would argue that the *yangbanxi* hero embodies—among other things—one of the great utopian hopes of communism, that is, the (re)integration of the subject, torn to pieces under capitalism. For Marx, of course, the defining experience of the worker in a capitalist society is one of alienation, from her labor, certainly, as manifested in the commodity-form and money, the crystallization of exchange value, but also, by extension, her own body and self. The worker is alienated from these aspects of her person because they do not 'belong' exclusively to her; they are, rather, implicated in a system of capital far outside her control.⁵² Communism promises the rectification of this state of affairs by returning to the individual those parts of herself which had previously been at the mercy of someone (or something) else. To exist in a communist utopia is to be whole (again)—to be human, in the fullest sense—in a way that is simply impossible to achieve in a capitalist society. And though no one during the Cultural Revolution claimed to have fully achieved communism—there was, in fact, no end in sight to revolution—my argument here is that *yangbanxi* heroes nonetheless personified this goal by virtue of their unitary nature.

This claim requires a certain amount of explication, for despite its centrality in Marx's work, the concept of alienation (*yihua*, in Chinese) is conspicuously absent from Mao's writings. It does not appear, for example, in *Quotations of Chairman Mao* (*Mao zhuxi yulu*), better known as 'the little red book' (*hong bao shu*), that most ubiquitous of textual talismans, nor does it appear in the '*lao san pian*,' the three short texts most commonly circulated and memorized during the Cultural Revolution.

⁵² For a comprehensive discussion of alienation in Marx, see Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

Indeed, Mao's lack of concern with alienation is such that it has prompted some to ask whether he was in fact a Marxist at all. As John Bryan Starr points out, however, China's demographic realities prompted Mao and the Communist Party to focus primarily on the plight of the peasantry (the Party's power base), rather than that of the small, urban proletariat. This view holds that alienation as a concept was far more relevant to the circumstances of the factory worker than those of the field hand, and since the Party's survival was in large part dependent on the latter, alienation fell by the wayside, though Maoism retained the basic characteristics of Marxism as a method, if not as a theory.⁵³ But even if we accept this line of reasoning, Mao's silence concerning the issue of alienation, in any of its forms, is nonetheless striking.

That being said, one should not confuse this silence with indifference toward the formation of unitary subjects, for while 'alienation' as such may not have been a central issue for Mao, the production of a new (communist) person most assuredly was. Indeed, one might go so far as to argue that this was precisely the point of the Cultural Revolution as an ideological enterprise. The so-called "Sixteen Points" (*Shiliu tiao*), issued by the Central Committee on August 8, 1966 as guidelines for the Cultural Revolution, define the movement as, above all, "a new period of socialist revolution" that will "touch people's souls" (*chujirenmen de linghun*).⁵⁴ This 'touch' was not to be a gentle caress, but an often violent refashioning of the individual as a whole, body and 'soul,' resulting in the production of the *xinren*, the 'new person,' in sync with the new historical age. As we have seen, one of the key technologies at work in this large-scale production was amateur performance, its end goal epitomized by the *yangbanxi* hero, whose appearance and essence, body and soul are all in line and revolutionary in the extreme. To think of this interest in the unitary in terms of alienation is to suggest that, for all Mao's apparent disregard for the term, the concept nonetheless makes its presence felt in the attention paid to the processes and technologies of subject formation, including amateur performance. The idealized product of these processes and technologies is ultimately a fully (re)integrated, i.e. unalienated and inalienable, subject.

But if the body, labor, and self are fused together in the metaphorical kiln of performance, and the subject is therefore made whole (again), the (re)inscription of this 'new' body—which is purportedly coextensive with the individual as an integral unity—in a system of (re)mediation shatters this fantasy of inalienability the moment it is called into being. To the extent that plastic amateur bodies are conceptualized as a medium, it is defined as such in relation to others. To return to Bolter and Grusin, "all mediation is remediation";⁵⁵ media cannot function in isolation. As we have seen, the characterization of bodies as a medium for *yangbanxi* heroes is most closely associated with sculpture and, beyond that, porcelain statuettes, but the critical point here is that amateur bodies operate as one medium among many. As a result of this, whatever

⁵³ John Bryan Starr, "On Mao's Self-Image As a Marxist Thinker", *Modern China* 3, no. 4 (1977): 435-442.

⁵⁴ "Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui guanyu wuchanjieji wenhua da geming de jue ding", 1.

⁵⁵ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation* 55.

sense of particularity is meant to ground the notion of a wholly (re)integrated subject, who cannot be equated and exchanged for something or someone else, is dramatically undercut. Yoked into a system of representation, amateur bodies are cast as commensurate with ceramic, vinyl, oil on canvas, etc. I am not suggesting that these media are actually interchangeable; they each maintain their material specificity to which we must pay appropriate heed. Rather, I am arguing that bodies are ‘thinkable’ on the same level as these other media and, further, that this relation reproduces that which we see in the capitalist commodity-form, that is, the possibility of conceptualizing radically disparate things in terms of a larger, overarching category, i.e. exchange value. Just as the implication of the laborer’s body in the capitalist system means that it, in a sense, no longer ‘belongs’ or is felt to belong, to the individual, the implication of the plastic body of the amateur in a system of (re)mediation and signification renders it other; it too becomes alienated from the subject even as performance is intended to bring about its (re)integration.

The enmeshed nature of the *yangbanxi* in a (re)mediatory network makes this broader system of representation, within which the amateur body operates, possible, and the transformative technology of performance is the method through which this occurs. At the end of the day, however, the particular mechanism of transformation is rooted in the abstraction and intermedial promiscuity of the ‘character,’ in this case, of the revolutionary hero. We have already seen how the “dynamic stillness” of *liangxiang* helps propel stationary, sculptural moments in the *yangbanxi* from one medium to another, but these fixed poses are merely the means through which this dynamism is enacted. The thing that is being moved and reproduced—the whole point of the entire exercise—is the character, the model into which amateurs are meant to mold themselves. As this intermedial mobility makes clear, the notion of character employed by *yangbanxi* is such that they can be dislocated from the ‘confines’ of plot. Li Yuhe wanders off by himself to grace a vanity mirror, and onstage heroes are called upon to carry out new exploits, to be emplotted anew off stage, as ‘real life’ revolutionaries.

In this regard, *yangbanxi* characters are remarkably similar to those constitutive of anime’s media mix, which, as Steinberg notes, operate in excess of any given medium.

The character is not only materialized in different mediums—celluloid, paper, or plastic—it is also an abstract device that allows for the communication across media forms and media materialities. It is abstract because it is always in excess of its particular material incarnations. The character cannot be reduced to any one of its incarnations but must be thought of both in its material forms and in the ways that it exceeds them. It is this surplus that permits different media and material instances to communicate.

Yet this autonomy from any specific media incarnation does not signal the end to medium specificity; rather, each manifestation of the character foregrounds the distinct properties of the medium in question. [...] In this respect, the character in its media crossings generates a degree of convergence between media forms around its image, but it also abstracts some of the

specificity of each medium and transposes this specificity to other material incarnations.⁵⁶

The character becomes an organizational node within the system of (re)mediation, or, in Steinberg's case, the media mix, that works both to bring media closer together in 'communication' with one another and to expand the system still further, that is, to channel the character's 'excess' into the colonization of ever more media. It is this excess that gives the character the ability to move about the material world, to appear both in a comic book and act as a model for the molding of amateur bodies on the stage. But this excess also means that one incarnation is always haunted by the others. An amateur body transforming (successfully, it is hoped) into a revolutionary hero via performance is never *just* an amateur body. It is, instead, a particular body doubling as an exemplar of an abstraction that can never be fully represented or encapsulated. It is precisely this issue of character excess that accounts for the continued alienation of the amateur performer's body from herself, even as she tries to 'become' an inalienable, unitary subject.

In her study on the "economy of character" of the eighteenth-century English novel, Deidre Shauna Lynch speaks to the connection between this excessiveness and the market. She writes of the fear of overly independent characters who do not stay in their intended place, whether within the confines of the novel or without. "[T]he excessiveness that [...] will subvert the economy of the novel and the ecology of a psychological culture has to do with how characters in England [...] have propertylike properties. They are objects of merchandising, of commodity tie-ins and spin-offs."⁵⁷ At issue is "[c]haracters' quality of eerie thing-hood—their quality of being at once 'out there' and 'other-than-us,' the way that, like the commodities in *Capital*, they seem more autonomous, memorable, and real than their makers, our suspicion that their clutter could crowd us out."⁵⁸ Characters are unnerving and unsettling in the textual world Lynch examines because they move suspiciously like—and sometimes as—commodities, gallivanting about when we would have them stay put. And just as the commodity reorganizes England's economy in the 1700s, so too does this new conception of the 'excessive' character reorient the novel, both in terms of its textual economy and its position vis-à-vis the market, a parallel made concrete in the form of character merchandizing, a practice salient to both Lynch and Steinberg's respective areas of interest.

There is a strong case to be made for understanding the (re)mediation of *yangbanxi* as a system driven by character merchandizing as well. It is the characters, more than anything else, that wend their way from medium to medium, consumer good to consumer good, in a process that this dissertation as a whole attempts to unravel. The same abstracted excessiveness of the character that impels it to migrate in this way and haunts one representation with the specter of all the rest also works to inscribe

⁵⁶ Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix* 84.

⁵⁷ Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 18.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

things associated with characters into a system, and therefore an economy, of signification. Comparable but not quite interchangeable, character 'merchandise' of this sort flirts with the exchangeability inherent in the commodity-form, if only within the system of (re)mediation itself. The result for the amateur performer is alienation from her own body, which is as much an example of character merchandise as anything else. To the extent that a character's 'thing-hood' has the potential to disrupt, it does so here by turning the amateur body into a thing whose signifying power stems from well outside the individual's control.

Their common promiscuity notwithstanding, however, it is important here to distinguish between the emerging conceptualization of characters in eighteenth-century British fiction as essentially individuals, with inner lives that stretch beyond the confines of the novel,⁵⁹ and the approach to characters and characterization in the *yangbanxi*. For the characters of the *yangbanxi* are, first and foremost, understood not so much as persons as particular manifestations of generalizable types. We might trace this notion back to Mao's 1942 *Talks* and his explanation, inspired by Lenin, of why the people demand art: "life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life."⁶⁰ Characters are not meant to be individuated persons. They are both more and less than that: more because as exemplars of type, they operate on a "higher plane" of abstraction, and less because this abstraction comes at the cost of particularity and the potential for audience identification. Of course, the classification of characters into types has a long history in China, especially in the realm of the performing arts, where dramatic role types (*sheng* or *mo*, *dan*, etc.) are crucial organizational principles for plays and troupes as well as the deployment of performance conventions. Creating the *yangbanxi*, especially the operatic pieces of the repertoire, meant grappling with these entrenched role types and reinventing them along sufficiently revolutionary lines. The broad typology that emerged through this process is given voice most famously in the articulation of the so-called 'three prominences' principle, mentioned above. This hierarchy is such that the world of the *yangbanxi* is essentially Manichean, populated by only three easily recognizable groups: the heroes (*yingxiong*), the villains (*fanmian renwu*), and a select group of characters who demonstrate the capacity for change and growth (*zhuanbian renwu*).

Within this formulation, the hero of any particular *yangbanxi* is but one example of the "proletarian hero type," the sculpting or *suzao* of which, was the 'basic task' of socialist artistic production, as we have seen. This leaves the notion of particularity in a

⁵⁹ As a result of this understanding of characters as 'people,' Alex Woloch, for example, can speak of the ethical implications of devoting narratological attention to the protagonist at the expense of minor characters in the realist novel. See Alex Woloch, *One Vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁶⁰ Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature 1895-1945*, ed. Kirk A Denton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 470.

rather precarious position, as Fang Yun's⁶¹ treatment of the appropriate use of 'detail' (*xijie*) makes clear:

The experience of creating the revolutionary *yangbanxi* tells us that the use of typical details (*dianxing xijie*) is a powerful artistic method in the sculpting (*juzao*) of the proletarian hero's image (*xingxiang*). But detail, after all, is detail. It is only a component of a play's overall structure. Only by using the description of detail in service to demonstrating the main issue and sculpting characters, only by adhering to the "three prominences" principle when using detailed description and paying attention to the relations between and among particular details, can we fully make use of the artistic value of the description of detail. There are some authors who do not start from the whole in considering the structural distribution of detail or depart from the main line of contradiction and conflict, attaching all manner of extraneous details to the heroic character's body. Or they do not distinguish the important from the unimportant, the primary from the secondary, and pad their writing with pretty words. This kind of work resembles the shape of a sick tree with a mess of branches and gnarled roots but a short and weak trunk. In this way the contradiction cannot coalesce and the personality (*xingge*) of the heroic character cannot be fully manifested. There are also some plays that emphasize "stage results" (*wutai xiaoguo*), independently establishing loads of details for 'changing characters' (*zhuanyuan renwu*) and negative characters or single-mindedly seeking points of interest and spectacle through detail. Thus, the main theme is made insipid and the hero's image is weakened and damaged. These [tendencies] must all be suppressed.⁶²

Detail—and, by extension, particularity—is useful only insofar as it helps define the more general type, thus the oxymoronic notion of "typical details." By contrast, any element that threatens to take away from the supremacy of the heroic type is rendered dangerously superfluous. And yet, even within the restrictions of this overarching typology, individual heroes are still meant to be compelling as characters, to have "personality" (*xingge*), for only then can the *yangbanxi* be truly effective.

This abiding tension is never fully resolved. On the one hand, the typicality of *yangbanxi* heroes, and thus their intentional generalizability, make them all the more reproducible and intermedially promiscuous. There is no underlying notion here that there can only be one Yang Zirong or Fang Haizhen. There is nothing amiss about the idea of mass (re)producing these figures since they make no claim of individuality—they are reproducible because they are typical and, conversely, rendered more typical,

⁶¹ "Fang Yun" was a pen name used by a writing group in Shanghai, said to be under the direction of the then-minister of culture, Yu Huiyong, to promote the *yangbanxi* and other works in the official press in the waning years of the Cultural Revolution. "Chu Lan" is "Fang Yun"'s Beijing counterpart.

⁶² My translation. Fang Yun 方耘, *Geming yangbanxi xuexi zhaji* 革命样板戏学习札记 [Notes on the Study of the Revolutionary *Yangbanxi*] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1974), 79.

that is, more abstract, with every instance of (re)production. This emphasis on typicality makes it possible, for example, for a poster attributed to the Central Academy of Industrial Arts (ca.1968) to depict two Li Yuhes and two Li Tiemeis within the same frame and for the 1970 National Day parade in Beijing to feature not only *yanbanxi* floats, but hundreds of people identically dressed as *yangbanxi* heroes. If part of what makes character merchandizing so disruptive to the world Lynch investigates is the repetition of things that should be singular, there are no such expectations here. The more revolutionary heroes there are the better.

On the other hand, however, the abstraction of typicality is always incomplete, for material specificity is never evacuated fully. The hero must ultimately be sculpted out of *something*, and to the extent that amateur bodies are conceptualized as one such *something*, or medium, they in turn 'circulate' as a function of this—albeit always partial—abstraction. In other words, amateur bodies become alienable and, ultimately, 'consumable' within the media(ted) economy of representation constitutive of the *yangbanxi* as a remediatory system. By way of closing, I would like to suggest that this condition, in which the amateur body is given over, in a sense, to a system of representation, is also shared by the professional. Indeed, it is the professional's body that becomes the most visible terrain on which the tensions between particularity and typicality, medium specificity and abstraction, production and consumption are played out. After all, the production of the revolutionary hero is, more often than not, brought about through the dedicated and repeated consumption of professional performances, in all their various (re)mediated forms. Paradoxically, this process, far from achieving the (re)integration of the subject, renders the amateur's body no less an object of consumption than the professional star.

Bodysnatching and the Making of the Star

Lilya Kaganovsky begins her study of male subjectivity under Stalin with a straightforward enough question: "What does the socialist realist hero look like?"⁶³ We might ask the same of the *yangbanxi* hero. On the face of it, the answer elicited is quite simple: tall, muscular, healthy and rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed, sporting a square jaw and thick eyebrows, and so and so forth. Like pornography, we know the socialist realist body when we see it. But when one stops to ask whence this aesthetic originates, significant complications arise. It was possible for professionals, as I argue above, to lay claim to the politically advantageous title of amateur. Like everybody else, they too were permanent students of the masses and engaged in an endless process of self-improvement and transformation, spurred on by the performance of revolutionary heroes on stage and screen. Those actors who helped develop the *yangbanxi* and/or made them famous—Qian Haoliang (Hao Liang) as Li Yuhe, Tong Xiangling as Yang Zirong, and Yang Chunxia as Ke Xiang in *Azalea Mountain (Dujianshan)* to name just

⁶³ Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity Under Stalin*, Pitt series in Russian and East European studies (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008. 226), 1.



Figure 4.4 Mass producing heroines on the model of *The Red Detachment of Women* in the 1970 National Day parade. As published in *Renmin huabao* 人民画报 [*People's Pictorial*] no.12 (1970): 15.

three—could boast a slightly more reciprocal relationship with the characters they played, however. Performing for them was not simply a matter of molding their bodies and selves according to the model; rather, they had a hand in molding the model itself. In other words, they made the model as much as it (re)made them.

What, then, does the *yangbanxi* hero look like? He looks like the actor who first embodied him. And lest this answer seem flip, I hasten to add that there is no *a priori* reason why this should be so. This particular connection between character and actor's body is produced and endlessly reinforced; it is not given. There is no inherent reason why a pictorial representation of Li Yuhe need look like Qian Haoliang. As an abstraction, Li Yuhe can look like anyone; indeed, the notion of amateur performance

as a technology of transformation is predicated on this possibility. An amateur Ke Xiang need not have Yang Chunxia's distinctive hairstyle⁶⁴ to *be* Ke Xiang. And yet, more often than not, the remediation of the *yangbanxi* hero as a character is also the remediation of the professional actor's body. It is as though the particularity required to make a *yangbanxi* hero more than an immaterial 'type' is taken from these individuals' bodies, a particularity that is never truly given back, even as the character moves from one medium to another.

The relationship between an actor's body and the notion of character is of course complicated, the distinction between the two blurry at best. Richard DeCordova argues that "[t]he body that appears in fiction films actually has an ambiguous and complex status: at any moment one can theoretically locate two bodies in the one: a body produced (that of the character) and a body producing (that of the actor). An attention to the former draws the spectator into the representation of character within the fiction. An attention to the latter, on the other hand, draws the spectator into a specific path of intertextuality that extends outside of the text as a formal system."⁶⁵ Insightful as DeCordova's observation may be, he is remiss in attributing this doubleness exclusively to the cinematic body. Bertolt Brecht's notion of the alienation effect on the stage, for example, famously makes use of this doubleness to elicit a form of critique.⁶⁶ For his part, David Graver argues that the stage actor has no fewer than seven ontologically distinct bodies, which interact to create an "ontological shimmer" surrounding the actor's presence.⁶⁷

Within the context of the *yangbanxi*, when performance, even for the professional, is couched in terms of transformation, any 'ontological shimmer' is problematic; it belies a failure in the transformative process, a 'misfire' as it were. If performance means 'becoming,' then Qian Haoliang *is* Li Yuhe. But it turns out that, in the case of the professional who develops the role, the reverse is also true: in a very real sense, Li Yuhe *is* also Qian Haoliang. This identity is perfectly understandable—and desirable—during the actual moment of performance. The difficulty arises when Li Yuhe, as a character, begins to move beyond the particularity of one body on one stage. As Li Yuhe flits from medium to medium, he takes Qian Haoliang's body with him. We might think of this as a kind of hijacking of Qian Haoliang's material corporeal form, a kind of bodysnatching. In essence, Li Yuhe commandeers Qian Haoliang's body and takes it 'outside' of him, such that Qian Haoliang's body is no longer his 'own'; rather, it 'belongs' to the remedial system as a whole. And this is precisely the rub: for while Li Yuhe may have no expectation of singularity, Qian Haoliang does, such that endless repetition and remediation ultimately changes what

⁶⁴ Huang, "Azalea Mountain and Late Mao Culture", 402-425.

⁶⁵ Richard DeCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 19-20.

⁶⁶ For a collection of Brecht's writings on this and other subjects, see *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of An Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

⁶⁷ David Graver, "The Actor's Bodies", *Text and Performance Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (1997): 221-235.

we mean by “Qian Haoliang” and our understanding of the relation of this proper noun to a body that is at once particular and iterable *ad infinitum*.

To the extent that this is the case, the technologies of *yangbanxi* remediation also operate as what we might call, following Jennifer Bean, “technologies of socialist stardom”:⁶⁸ representations of the hero double as representations of the actor, who has become abstracted from herself insofar as she is defined by a system of representation. In other words, she is no longer a person or unitary subject; she is a star, a remediated system and economy of signification unto herself. If the amateur performer is alienated from her body by virtue of its participation in a media system, the star becomes the system: the star goes where the character goes, and character ‘merchandising’ becomes ‘commodified’ celebrity. As a result, while the amateur performer seeks to transform herself into a generalizable revolutionary hero, she does so by molding her body into the particular form of the circulating and ‘consumable’ body of the star. The (re)mediation of the hero via the standardization of *yangbanxi* performance practice—the specification of costumes, make up, properties, etc.—is as much a matter of streamlining production and trying to weed out misfires as it is about delimiting the terms of consumption of media(ted) bodies. Ironically enough, participating in this mode of production/consumption means, in a sense, opening oneself up to the possibility of character—or better, perhaps, remediatary—bodysnatching. Far from producing a unitary subject, predicated on the correspondence of ‘appearance’ and ‘essence,’ body and ‘soul,’ we are instead left with eminently consumable misfires and alienable bodies that refuse to stay put.

⁶⁸ Jennifer M Bean, “Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body”, *Camera Obscura* 16, no. 3 (2001): 8-57.

Coda:
The Curator, the Investor, and the Dupe;
Or,
Meditations on Cultural Revolution Memorabilia

Nearly forty years after the close of the Cultural Revolution, China is awash in Mao badges. Sold in flea markets and tourist kiosks across the country, the vast majority of these badges, emblems of both the man and the passion he once instilled in the masses, are fakes or, as one dealer told me, “new reproductions” (*xin zhizao*). The proliferation of counterfeit Cultural Revolution memorabilia, including Mao badges, comic books, propaganda posters, ceramics, etc., is ultimately an indication of the strength of the Maoist collectible market: producing Mao badges in the post-Mao era is, as it turns out, a money-making endeavor.¹ Fueled by shockingly high prices at auction, the trade and collection of Maoist artifacts has become a popular, if morally ambiguous, activity. As such, it has been increasingly entangled in discourses of historical responsibility, on the one hand, and connoisseurship and investment, on the other. Opposed as these formulations may appear, they in fact both work to decenter and displace consumer desire; individuated connections between person and thing are subsumed and deferred in the name of future generations and anticipated payouts. The Mao-era object loses its particularity and materiality; it is imagined as perfectly alienable. And yet, these modes of collecting are constituted in relation to another, which is in fact predicated on an inalienable tie between person and thing. As such, it reengages with a similar socialist dream of an inalienable relationship between a person and (the product of) her labor. Indeed, as I bring this dissertation to a close, this coda argues that much of the discourse on Cultural Revolution memorabilia actually reproduces, through its characterization of consumption, defining socialist concerns.

The Ethics of Collecting and the Primacy of History

In August 2006, the Chinese monthly *Collections* (*Shoucang*), affiliated with the Shaanxi Provincial Museum in Xi'an, released a special issue entirely devoted to Cultural Revolution memorabilia. This was the first time the magazine had given such prominence to the topic, a point of great interest for many of its readers. Indeed, in many respects, one might say that this special issue was long overdue, given the succession of collecting “fevers” (*re*) tied to Mao and the “red” era that characterized the 1990s and early 2000s. *Collections*, which began publishing in 1993, had certainly acknowledged this collecting phenomenon over the years with one-off articles here and there, but the magazine maintained its primary focus on objects more commonly understood as ‘antiques,’ such as late-imperial porcelains, for example. The timing of *Collections*’ more protracted foray into this decidedly contemporary arena was by no means accidental; rather, it marked the fortieth anniversary of the start of the Cultural

¹ This is not necessarily the case with all Cultural Revolution-era objects. The market for LPs, for example, is quite small, too small, as yet, to be a profitable area for contemporary ‘reproductions.’

Revolution and the thirtieth anniversary of its conclusion. Though typically said to have begun in May 1966, the month of August also has a particular significance: it is in August 1966 that Mao first reviewed the Red Guards from atop the rostrum of the Gate of Heavenly Peace, arguably the Cultural Revolution's most iconic event. The importance of the 2006 anniversary was not lost on the magazine's editors—or its readers, for that matter, one of whom commented in a subsequent issue that *Collections* was one of the few places where the anniversary had been observed at all.² The reason for this general oversight, as another reader no doubt correctly asserts, was the continued political sensitivity of the Cultural Revolution, limiting the places and ways in which it could be discussed. *Collections* found itself in a fairly unique position in this regard, for while informed discussion of the Cultural Revolution may well be in short supply in the People's Republic of China (PRC), objects (purportedly) from the Cultural Revolution abound. These objects and their collection were (and remain) a politically acceptable point of entry into the tumultuous history of the Cultural Revolution decade.

Politically acceptable though it may be, however, the trade in and collection of Cultural Revolution artifacts are nonetheless often cast as morally questionable, a fact acknowledged in the special issue's opening essay by the magazine's managing editor, Yang Caiyu. Yang begins his article on the duality of Cultural Revolution collecting by articulating some of the editors' central concerns as they considered putting the dedicated issue together. "Was it wise?" Yang asks, "Could it lead readers into an ambiguous land full of pain, pitfalls, and confusion? Into burning flames?"³ Yang's overwrought language here clearly invokes the notion of a paternalistic editor, worrying about the (mental) health of his fragile, hapless readers. Though we may well take issue with this characterization of the magazine's readership, these questions do indicate the extent to which the Cultural Revolution was (and still is) experienced by many as a physically and emotionally scarring time.⁴ This notion of the Cultural Revolution as not just a political 'mistake,' as the Party's official 1981 decision on the period holds, but as a lived trauma in fact colors all discussions of artifacts from the period, for there is something rather discomfiting and perhaps even crass about the circulation of emblems of suffering, violence, and death as 'collectibles.'

The source of this moral disquiet, it seems to me, is ultimately the commodity status of the collectible, specifically, the extent to which the object/collectible is

² ""'Wenge' yu shoucang wenhua bitan" du hou gan" "'文革'与收藏文化笔谈"读后感 [Thoughts on Reading "A Discussion on the Cultural Revolution and Collecting Culture"] *Shoucang* 收藏 [Collections], no. 10 (2006).

³ My translation. Yang Caiyu 杨才玉, "Fansi "wenge" shoucang wenhua de liangmianxing" 反思“文革”收藏文化的两面性 [Rethinking the Duality of Cultural Revolution Collecting Culture], *Shoucang* 收藏 [Collections] no. 8 (2006): 21.

⁴ Consider the range of works that engage with this theme, from the advent of so-called "scar literature" (*shanghen wenxue*) in the late 1970s and early 1980s to contemporary films like Zhang Yimou's recent and immensely popular *Coming Home* (*Guilai*).

constituted by and participates in a system of consumer desire.⁵ To cast Mao badges as ‘collectibles’ (*shoucangpin* or *cangpin*, in Chinese) is to render them desirable, to render them objects of desire, in a way that risks, perhaps, effacing their role as reminders, as indexical traces of historical trauma. Were a total effacement of this kind to take place, it would be tantamount to a disavowal of that trauma having ever taken place. Rather than operating as simple indices of trauma, then, Cultural Revolution collectibles always threaten to simultaneously become agents of its very erasure as a function of the way in which they circulate. There is, moreover, a potential parallel between the consumer desire these collectibles engender today and the politically and ideologically inflected desire these objects originally embodied and produced.⁶ One sometimes sees, therefore, a conflation of the two, such that the purchase of a Mao badge in 2015 may be reduced to an approbation of the policies, chaos, and violence of 1966.⁷ The situation is particularly charged in the collecting world as so many of the objects now being collected were produced at a time when many collections of antiques and cultural artifacts were being destroyed.

Yang Caiyu, for one, appears to be very cognizant of the tendency toward such a conflation, and he therefore tries to distinguish between two modes of Cultural Revolution collecting: the red and the gray. For Yang, the popular term “*hongse shoucang*” or “red collecting” is decidedly pejorative. The red collector does little more than gather generic, official, mass-produced trinkets that supplement the Party line. Red collecting is fundamentally about emotions—chief among them desire—and an affective connection to objects yoked to a nostalgic enterprise. When deployed as a negative term, as in Yang’s editorial, this nostalgia is understood as uncritical and non-reflexive; it constitutes the perfect alignment of present consumer desire and a (real or imagined) past ideologically driven desire. This apparently naïve and restorationist concept is contrasted with what Yang ultimately calls for, that is, “*baise shoucang*” or “gray collecting,” which, as its name suggests, concerns itself with the less laudatory. “[T]he Cultural Revolution, that total (*quanjuxing*) blunder and period of nationwide chaos, also involved the sabotage carried out by Lin Biao and Jiang Qing’s two counterrevolutionary cliques. The situation was very complicated. Only those official objects reflecting the positive [parts of the Cultural Revolution] can be deemed ‘red’ collecting. Correspondingly, things reflecting the dark and evil [elements of the

⁵ As Marita Sturken has shown, this is not always a source of anxiety. At the site of the Oklahoma City bombing and Ground Zero in Lower Manhattan, commodity consumption has become a crucial component of the memorialization with few objections. Sturken understands this as an effect of increasing neoliberalism in the United States. See Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism From Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁶ This is not to say that these objects were not also experienced in terms of consumer desire during the Cultural Revolution—indeed, this dissertation argues that they most certainly were.

⁷ This manner of conflation is not limited to the world of collecting. One sees a similar anxiety in relation to Cultural Revolution scholarship, as though studying the period in anything less than staunchly negative terms necessarily constitutes an endorsement of its goals and methods.

Cultural Revolution] cannot be called ‘red’ collecting; this is called ‘gray’ collecting.”⁸ As Yang describes it, gray collecting does not merely focus on the positives; it is not nostalgic in the sense of expressing a yearning to go back to the way things were (or the way we imagine them to have been). Rather, it seeks to offer an “objective” take on both the merits and sufferings of the era. If the idea of Cultural Revolution collectibles seems morally questionable, gray collecting as a practice promises to counteract consumer desire with a dedication to staring historical complexity and trauma squarely in the face.

Yang Caiyu’s advocacy for a critical engagement with the collection of Cultural Revolution artifacts only goes so far, of course, as his reference to the “counterrevolutionary cliques” of Lin Biao and Jiang Qing makes clear. Gray collecting, as described here, is not meant to question the applicability or power of such labels. Insofar as it is meant to be a form of critique, its targets remain the usual suspects. For all the political leeway permitted by a focus on material culture, *Collections*’ special issue does not stray very far from the beaten path, reproducing accepted narratives of the Cultural Revolution—most notably, the official Party narrative—with an added emphasis on suffering and loss. Simply put, the purpose of Yang’s gray collecting is not so much the interrogation of History as it is an exercise in its (purportedly objective) memorialization.

We see in the call for gray collecting, therefore, a recurring trope in much of the discourse surrounding Cultural Revolution collectibles: instead of a morally dubious act, collecting Cultural Revolution artifacts is recast as a service to History. The power of consumer desire, that most unsettling of forces, is thereby subsumed by the notion of historical worth and responsibility. One does not collect because one wants to own and/or consume an object; one acquires an object because it is historically meaningful (*you lishi yiyi*); and one collects because one must do so for the good of all. Moral qualm is made moral imperative.

It is not surprising, perhaps, given the emphasis on collecting as memorialization that we see in Yang Caiyu, that this “historical responsibility” (*lishi zeren*) to collect, as Wang Xintang puts it in his contribution to the special issue of *Collections*,⁹ is typically invoked in concert with the notion of a Cultural Revolution museum. The author and former editor of *People’s Literature* (*Renmin wenxue*) Ba Jin (1904-2005) repeatedly called for such an institution for the good of both China and the world; these calls have been repeated in turn, such that one can hardly invoke the notion of a Cultural Revolution museum without mentioning Ba Jin and his as-yet unrealized dream. Wang’s treatment of the Cultural Revolution museum question is illustrative.

⁸ My translation. Yang, "Fansi "wenge" shoucang wenhua de liangmianxing".

⁹ Wang Xintang 王信堂, "'Wenge" yiwu shoucang zongheng tan" “文革”遗物收藏纵横谈 [A Note on the Collection of Cultural Revolution Relics], *Shoucang* 收藏 [Collections] no. 8 (2006): 72-74.

As for the establishment of a Cultural Revolution museum, Mr. Ba Jin has discussed it thusly: “A while ago in *Random Thoughts (Sixiang lu)* I recorded a conversation I had with a friend in which I said the best thing would be to establish a Cultural Revolution museum. I certainly don’t have any fully formed plan, nor have I considered it in any great detail, but I do have one firm belief: this is something that should be done, establishing a Cultural Revolution museum. It is every Chinese person’s responsibility.”

On April 17, 2006, *Shantou duoshi bao* reported the news that “Chenghai pagoda park [had] founded the country’s first folk (*minjian*) Cultural Revolution museum,” attracting much media attention, both domestic and foreign. But this museum is mainly a denunciation and condemnation of the politics of the Cultural Revolution. It is characterized by new buildings, like the “Epitaph for the Suffering Fallen” and the “Pavilion of Long Sounding Alarm,” but real, authentic objects of historical, cultural, and artistic value are scarce. As I see it, Cultural Revolution museums that decry politics and criticize ideology should not be undertaken by individuals. Individuals should focus on small museums specialized in art. The artifacts must be authentic (*zhenshi*), classic, and rich, because only exhibitions with strong cultural context and independent cultural objects can enlighten (*qidi*) viewers to the importance of the living Cultural Revolution archive without qualm.¹⁰

The individual’s responsibility is not to pontificate; it is simply to collect and display his collection. The ‘historically responsible’ collector operates as though he were the curator of his own would-be museum, exhibiting and juxtaposing objects in order to contextualize both the beauty and trauma of the Cultural Revolution.¹¹

‘Curating’ one’s own museum is, we should note, a rather common occurrence in the PRC. This is certainly the case with the closest thing to a Cultural Revolution museum in China today: the Jianchuan Museum Cluster in Anren, Sichuan, which boasts the world’s largest collection of Cultural Revolution objects on display in its many museums. Like so many other museums in contemporary China, it is a private venture undertaken by one of China’s super-rich: real-estate mogul Fan Jianchuan. The items exhibited in the museum cluster are, essentially, Fan Jianchuan’s private collection, making Fan the very embodiment of the notion of the collector as curator.

The key to this hybrid discursive construct is a shift from the logic of private ownership and consumption to that of addressing and informing an audience. The collector/curator, who collects as part of a personal responsibility to History, is, among

¹⁰ My translation. *Ibid.*, 74.

¹¹ Note that this represents one understanding of the role of the museum curator in contemporary China. While it is certainly the most prominent in the discourse under discussion here, there are other views. For an in-depth look at the range of museological practices in China today, see Kirk A Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014).

other things, a pedagogue; he collects in order to teach and ultimately to prevent history from repeating itself. The Jianchuan Museum Cluster motto, etched on the wall of the museum cluster's visitor center, for example, firmly situates Fan Jianchuan's museological project within exactly this framework: "To collect war for the sake of peace; to collect lessons for the sake of the future; to collect disaster for the sake of tranquility; to collect folklore for the sake of heritage." Each of the motto's four clauses corresponds to one of the museum cluster's main thematic divisions: the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Cultural Revolution, the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, and folklore (*minsu*). The multiple museums dedicated to the 'red period,' filled to capacity with all manner of objects, are meant to serve as lessons (*jiaoxun*) above all else; they are a pedagogical endeavor rooted in the act of collection, yes, but also in the act of display, display targeted first and foremost to those to whom 'the future' ostensibly belongs. Wang Xintang formulates the collector/curator's responsibility as follows: to "leave a historical archive that is as authentic (*zhenshi*) as possible for future generations."¹² Collections here are meant to be seen and experienced by individuals other than the collector him- or herself, and it is the very notion of a would-be audience that works to transform the figure of the Cultural Revolution memorabilia collector from a private consumer of questionable morals to a selfless collector/curator dedicated to the good of all humankind.¹³

To be clear, I am not suggesting that all collectors collect with the intention of opening a private museum. Though considerably more prevalent in the PRC than in the contemporary United States, the notion of every flea market purchaser of a Mao badge opening a museum in which to exhibit it is patently absurd. What I am suggesting, however, is that one of the dominant strains of discourse pertaining to the collection of Cultural Revolution artifacts casts such behavior as acceding to a moral, historical imperative in largely pedagogic, museological terms. To the extent that this is the case, collecting within this discursive framework tries to negate the possibility of individualized consumer desire—or any other affective connection to a particular object—through a radical decentering of that desire. One does not collect—one does not purchase and consume—for oneself; one does so on behalf of History for an imagined, future viewer other than oneself. The collector/curator's troublesome status as a desiring subject in his or her own right is thereby diffused.

This is not to say that the figure of the collector is rendered insignificant by any means. On the contrary, the collector/curator distinguishes himself from his imagined audience by virtue of his ability to 'objectively' appraise the historical (and pedagogical) value of any given artifact. Unfettered by the vagaries of his own personal consumer

¹² My translation. Wang, "'Wenge' yiwu shoucang zongheng tan", 73.

¹³ Note that this form of display is conceived in contradistinction to the instances of display I discuss in Chapter 3, that is, instances when the display of commodities is inextricably linked to their consumption, as in the shop window or in the case of decorative items. The analogous nature of the two kinds of display is nonetheless striking. Indeed, it suggests that the curatorial turn among collectors that I am describing here cannot but fail to leave the commodity and consumer desire completely behind.

desire, the idealized collector can give free rein to his considerable powers of discernment, powers honed through the reading of publications like *Collections* as well as catalogues devoted to specific classes of objects, such as Cultural Revolution teapots or ceramics more generally.¹⁴ The very same publications that produce the figure of the collector in museological terms also work to separate the collector/curator from his would-be audience of supposed naïfs. In this context, the collector is conceptualized as part of a power dynamic based on access to and mastery of a particularized kind of knowledge. The collector's ability to discern a rare item, rich in historical significance, from mass-produced, 'worthless' fakes is neither ideologically neutral (were such a thing even possible), nor innate. What we are talking about here is an acquired proficiency in navigating and manipulating culturally constructed notions of value, historical, cultural, and artistic. In other words, we are talking about connoisseurship as a basis for culturally appropriate modes of appraisal.

A detailed analysis of the ideological and political stakes in the production of this particular brand of connoisseurship is beyond the scope of this project. It may, however, be helpful to briefly note the extent to which the 'historical value' (*lishi jiazhi*) of Cultural Revolution memorabilia—the collector/curator's purported chief priority—tends to correspond to the typical modes of valuation of antiques and collectibles. Concerns such as authenticity, condition, rarity, provenance, ties to significant events or people, and the quality of craftsmanship and artistry are foremost in the collector/curator's mind, just as we would expect them to be in the mind of the auction house appraiser. And this is precisely the point. For all the claims being made about historical responsibility and a higher purpose separate from and even at odds with the discomfiture created by the consumer desire that fuels the market, at the end of the day, the selfless collector/curator must master the same forms of knowledge, the same brand of connoisseurship, as his discursive double and apparent opposite—the collector/investor—to which I now turn.

Collecting Exchange Value

If the collector/curator is at pains to characterize his collecting as being in the service of something greater than himself, i.e. History, the collector/investor is decidedly untroubled by such concerns. On the contrary, he is unwaveringly preoccupied with the interests of his personal pocketbook. He is in this business for money. And that's exactly what collecting is to him: a series of business transactions. At its most undiluted, the figure of the collector/investor is embodied in the form of Cultural Revolution memorabilia brokers, many of whom participate in a nationwide network of dealers and procurers. Shen Hong opens his *Cultural Revolution Artifacts* (*Wenge wenwu*) with an account of three such merchants, brothers from Wuhan, Hubei, and their respective businesses selling Cultural Revolution objects from the interior in

¹⁴ See, for example, *Wenge cibu tujian* 文革瓷壶图鉴 [Catalogue of Cultural Revolution Ceramic Teapots], ed. Cui Jinxin 崔晋新 (Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 2006); Fan, "Wenge" *ciqu tujian*.

Shenzhen, just across the border from Hong Kong. As other antique dealers in the city, faced with dropping prices for things like stamps, fell on hard times in the late 1990s, the brothers' businesses only grew, catering to both Mainland Chinese, like Shen Hong himself, as well as Hong Kong brokers, buying for international (one suspects especially western) collectors. Shen begins his book with a depiction of the brothers' trade in order to indicate the extent to which the collection of Cultural Revolution artifacts has become a global activity,¹⁵ but his initial focus on the middlemen who facilitate the consumption of others does more than simply establish the scope of international interest in the material culture of the Cultural Revolution. It also establishes a prescribed mode of interaction between collector and object in which the name of the game is not ownership, but rather investment.

The key word here is *touzi*, meaning capital investment or investing, a byword of for-profit collecting as well as Chinese postsocialist society more generally. Indeed, one might go so far as to argue that changes in investment practices—in who can invest in any given kind of venture for personal or corporate remunerative gain—have been constitutive of the Reform Era as such. Post-Mao 'development' (*fazhan*) and 'modernization' (*xian daibua*) have largely been defined in relation to the process of marketization, the success or failure of which is consistently measured in terms of a return or loss on investment. If postsocialist China is fundamentally characterized by an ongoing shift from a state heteronomy to a market heteronomy, as Jason McGrath contends,¹⁶ then investing becomes an increasingly important means through which Chinese postsocialist subjects understand, interpret, and interact with the world around them. I am suggesting, in essence, that one might consider 'investment' a "structure of feeling" in the contemporary PRC.

Just as the collector/curator need not have concrete museological aspirations to be constituted as such, then, the collector/investor need not run a business devoted to the buying and selling of Cultural Revolution memorabilia at a profit—that is, he need not be an actual 'middleman'—in order for him to approach collecting as a form of investing. The collector/investor of which I speak is, first and foremost, a discursive figure, the product of an elision of 'collecting' (*shoucang*) and 'investing' (*touzi*) of the kind we see prominently displayed in Shen Hong's *Cultural Revolution Artifacts*: each chapter title ends with the combination of the two terms, "collection investing" (*shoucang touzi*), as though the two were inseparable and the particular object(s) of investment made little difference, i.e. the ultimate concern is, quite simply, monetary value. This formulation of collecting as a form of investment is perhaps most powerfully borne out and produced by the promotion of a particular narrative trope: the tantalizingly high profit-margin of the diamond in the rough.

The standard narrative goes something like this: a man buys a porcelain cup at a flea market for a few hundred *kuai*, only to discover that it was made at Jingdezhen

¹⁵ Shen Hong 沈泓, *Wenge wenwu* 文革文物 [Cultural Revolution Artifacts] (Beijing: New World Press, 2003), 3-5.

¹⁶ Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

in 1975 for Mao's particular use; several years later he sells the cup at auction for over a hundred times what he paid for it; he is instantly wealthy. This tale of striking it rich by unearthing a treasure, undervalued by the average appraiser, is told and retold through the pages of magazines like *Collections*, *Collection World* (*Shoucang jie*), *Collectors* (*Shoucangjia*), and *China Auction* (*Zhongguo paimai*), to name a few, and the reproduction of this narrative, with the reader as protagonist, becomes the goal of such collection investment guides as *Cultural Revolution Artifacts*. This fantasy of happening upon an object of value overlooked by everyone save the discerning, visionary investor is not, of course, limited to the world of Cultural Revolution collectibles or even collectibles in general. We have entered the world of speculation, in which the venture capitalist and the weekend junk aficionado are equally at ease: one invests in a tech startup, hoping it will be the next Google (or Baidu), while the other buys a vase at a garage sale on the suspicion that it is a rare example of a Tang-dynasty 'tea dust' glaze.

The seductive power of this narrative form should not be underestimated, especially when it comes to the object world in which we live, since 'investment opportunities' might be as easily accessible as one's attic or storage bin. This is, after all, one of the underlying reasons for the success of an American television program like *Antiques Roadshow*.¹⁷ The TV show's drama stems from the 'reveal' structure of each individual appraisal: a member of the public brings in an item and the item is contextualized by a professional appraiser, who then asks the owner how much he or she paid for it or how much he or she thinks it might be worth monetarily. Each segment ends with the appraiser revealing the object's 'actual' worth, again, by way of a dollar estimate, a number that also appears at the bottom of the screen. The expectation and, in some cases, the deferment of the moment of revelation creates suspense, but the real drama comes from the discrepancy between what the individual paid for an object in the past and what someone else might pay for it at auction today. The greater the discrepancy, the greater the dramatic effect of the 'reveal.' One of *Antiques Roadshow*'s most well known appraisals, subsequently used in an *Antiques Roadshow* commercial, involves a 19th-century Navajo blanket said in 2001 to be worth up to half a million US dollars. In response to the evaluation made by the appraiser, Donald Ellis, the item's owner, "Ted," states that the blanket had up until that point simply been hanging off the back of a chair in his home.

The idea that a "national treasure," as Ellis calls the blanket, could be lying around one's house collecting dust is incredibly alluring and effectively recasts domestic objects not in terms of use-value or aesthetic value, but monetary, i.e. exchange, value. After watching an episode of *Antiques Roadshow*, my father, for example, has a habit of claiming that my inheritance will come from a battered duck decoy in my parents' den. The joke reaffirms the logic of *Antiques Roadshow* even as it calls its claims into question, for while it may be absurd to think that something as unremarkable as an old duck decoy might be worth a considerable sum, it is, on the face of it, no less absurd than an old blanket being worth a small fortune. First and foremost, then, *Antiques Roadshow* incites its viewers to ask of everything around them, "How much is this worth?" and, by extension, to use the answer to this question to

¹⁷ The American version is based on an earlier British program.

their advantage when raiding the neighbor's yard sale or divvying up a great-aunt's tchotchkes. The television show therefore promotes an appraiser-investor mentality through its narrative structure and emphasis on easily accessible objects.¹⁸

Much of the discourse surrounding collection investing in Cultural Revolution memorabilia works in a similar way, for one of the reasons one might decide to invest in such artifacts is not just their high auction prices, but also their availability. Unlike imperial jades, lacquers, and porcelains, as I stated at the very beginning of this coda, China is awash in objects (purportedly) from the Cultural Revolution. Who's to say that a well-informed trip to the antique market won't yield a vase worth upwards of a hundred thousand RMB?¹⁹ Or perhaps one might stumble on the Holy Grail of Cultural Revolution porcelains, the so-called "7501 porcelains" or "Chairman Mao porcelains," specially made by Jingdezhen's famed masters to be used in Zhongnanhai, in the hands of a clueless peddler? The key to capitalizing on these investment opportunities is, ultimately, knowledge, precisely the kind of knowledge found in publications and media outlets crucial to the production of the collector/investor as a discursive figure, namely, connoisseurship. For if the collector/curator seeks to distinguish himself from his (imagined) ignorant audience as a function of his status as a connoisseur, the collector/investor likewise seeks to distinguish himself and profit from the ignorance of the naïf and/or dupe.

Ideally, of course, the successful collector/investor capitalizes on trends before they develop; he "see[s] first what others see eventually," as Franklin Templeton Investments puts it in their ads. The savvy collector/investor is as much a visionary as the Wall St. financier who knew enough to invest in Microsoft 'on the ground floor.' In the world of Cultural Revolution collecting, the visionary *par excellence* is Dr. Yeo Seem Huat (Yang Xinfu), a Singaporean psychiatrist and private collector, who began buying up Cultural Revolution porcelains in the early 1990s. The (oft repeated) story goes that Dr. Yeo visited Beijing in 1993 where he ran into an unnamed American collector, who remarked, "We're collecting Chinese Cultural Revolution memorabilia, but you're all collecting Coca Cola bottles."²⁰ Duly chastised, Dr. Yeo quickly set about cornering the market on Cultural Revolution porcelains, amassing the largest collection of 7501 porcelains in the world, largely before anyone else knew anything about them. Partly because of his own single-mindedness in acquiring these objects, their prices rose steeply, in some cases, by up to tenfold in under five years.²¹ They rose so high and so quickly, in fact, that by the time other collector/investors sat up

¹⁸ For more on Antiques Roadshow and narrative, see Ronald Bishop, "What Price History? Functions of Narrative in Television Collectibles Shows", *The Journal of Popular Culture* 33, no. 3 (1999): 1-27; Abby Clouse, "Narratives of Value and the Antiques Roadshow: "A Game of Recognitions"", *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 1 (2008): 3-20.

¹⁹ A Cultural Revolution vase sold for 120000 RMB at auction in 2006, well above even its initial appraisal. Wang, "'Wenge' yiwu shoucang zongheng tan".

²⁰ My translation. Shen, *Wenge wenwu* 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

and took notice, most had been priced out of the market, the notable exception being the aforementioned Fan Jianchuan.

But what the average collector/investor lacks in vision, collection publications seem to argue, he can make up for in connoisseurship. The same logic that outlaws insider trading because asymmetries of knowledge reproduce themselves in asymmetrical investment gains dictates that the connoisseur has a market advantage over ill-informed competitors, buyers, and sellers.²² One profits in the collectibles market, as elsewhere, when someone else undervalues something valuable or overvalues something worthless, that is, when someone else appraises something ‘incorrectly,’ or, what amounts to the same thing, calls upon a different system of valuation. The idealized collector/investor, the consummate connoisseur, has the requisite knowledge, discernment, and foresight to fully capitalize on these ‘missteps’ and asymmetries when they appear, but ultimately what this means is that the success or failure of the collector/investor is just as dependent on the dupe’s ignorance and/or adherence to alternative motivations and systems of value as he is on his own connoisseurship.

I would submit, then, that the key difference between the collector/investor and the dupe, discursive figures we should think of as mutually constitutive, is not simply a question of the acquisition or lack of specialized knowledge. Rather, it is a difference in the mode of interaction of person and thing, which quite neatly reproduces Susan Stewart’s distinction between the collectible and the souvenir. For Stewart, “the collection is...the most abstract of all forms of consumption.”²³ Cut off from the circumstances of its production and use, the collectible is an object strangely detached from its own materiality.

[I]n its translation back into the particular cycle of exchange which characterizes the universe of the “collectable,” the collected object represents quite simply the ultimate self-referentiality and seriality of money at the same time that it declares its independence from “mere” money. We might remember that of all invisible workers, those who actually make money are the least visible. All collected objects are thereby *objets de lux*, objects abstracted from use value and materiality within a magic cycle of self-referential exchange.²⁴

The cyclicity implied by the collectible is crucial here, for the collector/investor always buys with a future sale in mind; an investment in an object only truly comes to fruition when it is resold for a profit. It is in the combination of the two transactions—the initial purchase as well as the resale—that finally proves the collector/investor’s prowess. While an object is in the collector/investor’s possession, it exists in suspension as a crystallization of exchange value, not unlike money, which constitutes the collector/investor’s ultimate concern. In this abstracted state, it is difficult to think of

²² This is a function of one of the main tenets of game theory.

²³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 165.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

the collector/investor's relationship with his 'investments' in terms of consumption at all. How does one 'consume' abstracted exchange value without partaking in exchange? Going a step further, is it possible to speak of *consumer* desire for dematerialized exchange value? The collector/investor does not desire a collectible as a particular material object; materiality is only relevant insofar as it affects the collectible's exchange value (its condition, for example). For that is truly what he desires: its exchange value, i.e. what somebody else will pay for it.

The collector/investor and collector/curator are therefore similarly characterized in terms of a decentering of individual consumer desire. Whereas the latter purchases on behalf of History for the benefit of an imagined future audience, the former hopes to cash in on the consumer desire of another would-be buyer. In their purest discursive forms, both figures act not as desiring subjects in their own right so much as middlemen—like the brothers from Wuhan selling memorabilia in Shenzhen—mediating the desires and interests of others: History, on the one hand, and some unsuspecting, irrational dupe, on the other. In both instances, the status of the middleman as intermediary works to counteract and allay moral qualms arising from the recasting of the Cultural Revolution artifact as a commodity constituted by consumer desire. In the case of the collector/curator, as we have seen, acting as a broker for History and those in need of edification transforms moral unease into a call to action. The collector/investor goes to the other extreme, focusing on exchange value to such an extent that material specificity becomes largely irrelevant. There is no question of conflating the collector/investor's purchase of an item with an endorsement of Cultural Revolution policies, for the particularities of the object are inconsequential to him. He could just as easily invest in stocks or bonds. As a mere placeholder for exchange value, the thing itself disappears, in a sense, and it is this disappearance that prevents the object from being embroiled in an ethical tug of war. In the end, one cannot sully something that is not there.

It is easy to see from these structural similarities how the discourses surrounding and producing the figures of the collector/curator and the collector/investor, though apparently diametrically opposed, can come to overlap. Exchange value is, after all, affected by such concerns as historical importance, and both the collector/curator and the collector/investor must be well versed in the same brand of connoisseurship. Indeed, it may behoove us at this juncture to refrain from speaking of two separate discursive figures and instead speak of two related modes of collecting, the curatorial and the investitive, constituted in contradistinction with the nostalgic and/or affective modes associated with Yang Caiyu's red collector, the dupe, and Susan Stewart's understanding of the souvenir.

The Souvenir and the Quest for the Inalienable

If the collectible for Stewart is tied to the abstraction of consumption and a crystallization of exchange value, the souvenir remains enmeshed with its materiality. Whereas the collectible 'says' nothing, the souvenir facilitates a narrative of origins,

origins that belong to the individual, not the object. It is not a story of production; it is a story of lived experience. As a result of this very particular relationship between person and thing, Stewart argues that one cannot covet the souvenir of another; souvenirs, like experiences, are non-transferable. The exception to this rule is the heirloom, which acts as a souvenir on behalf of a group or lineage.²⁵ I would suggest that Cultural Revolution memorabilia can similarly act as a souvenir of collective experience, even for those individuals, like those born after 1976, who did not live through the Cultural Revolution themselves. The collective nature of the narrative brought about by a Cultural Revolution object/souvenir need not detract from its affective power or from the strength of the attachment between the individual and the souvenir, and indeed, it is precisely the particularity of this attachment that separates this mode of consumption from those heretofore examined above. This person-thing interaction is not conceived as being 'on behalf of' anyone else; this is not the territory of middlemen. One purchases a Mao badge in this mode because one wants it. The desiring subject here is alive and well, as is the materiality of the object.

The resurrection of the desiring subject in Cultural Revolution discourse again raises uncomfortable questions concerning the ethics of such desire, questions the curatorial and investitive modes of collecting try very hard to skirt, as we have seen. To the extent that souvenirs evoke origin narratives, it seems inevitable that this kind of desire would be largely understood as nostalgic, that is, as longing for a, in this case, temporally conceived 'homeland.' There are additional explanations for this nostalgic turn as well, as I outlined above, but I am primarily concerned here not with the political implications of nostalgia as a potentially restorationist mode of consumption, but rather with the way in which the invocation of the Cultural Revolution object as a desirable souvenir (inadvertently?) reenacts a Maoist quest for an inalienable relationship between person and socialist thing.

We see here in the juxtaposition of the commodity, constituted by and constitutive of exchange value, and a claim to individualized affective ties between persons and things something very much akin to what Lynn Festa describes as "the paradox of the sentimental commodity" in eighteenth-century British sentimental fiction.

As the eighteenth-century market in articles like "Yorick" snuffboxes attests, sentimental objects and texts are not simply beloved possessions or gifts; they are *also* commodities whose strongest selling point is, paradoxically, their sentimental value. The very notion of a sentimental commodity is anomalous, representing the infusion of human particularity into the interchangeability of the commodity as an aspect of its value. The sentimental commodity brings together things that are meant to be kept discrete: the interchangeability of the market and the singularity of a thing that one loves; the authenticity or

²⁵ Ibid., 136-137.

spontaneity of one's personal ties to the world and the notion that emotional relations (to persons, to things) can be borrowed, rented out, had for money.²⁶

The same might well be said of the Cultural Revolution object/souvenir. It, too, brings together things that are meant to be discrete, the interchangeable and the particular. By contrast, the Cultural Revolution object/collectible presents no such predicament; indeed, it puts the commodity's metaphorical status as a stand-in for something else (exchange value, other commodities) to work, even as it seeks to displace the consumer desire the commodity implies. In the investitive mode of collection, interchangeability is precisely the point, so much so that the materiality of any given object, let alone its particularized affective potential, all but disappears. In the curatorial mode, an object is similarly rendered interchangeable with a generalized moral lesson. But for its part, the souvenir is in fact predicated on particularity, on the inalienability of its ties to a given individual.

The socialist critique of the commodity-form, of course, is centered on its role as an emblem of and participation in the alienation of labor under capitalism. A socialist alternative to the commodity-form, however, was not easy to come by. As I discuss in Chapter 1, the Russian Constructivists' were very concerned with the commodity and consumer desire. As a result, they conceived of the socialist thing not as object, but as comrade, though what this meant in terms of aesthetic practice was much more difficult to identify.²⁷ Faced with the same problem of how to deal with the commodity, Chinese Communists did not fare much better than their Soviet brethren. Instead of calls for Constructivist *novii byt'*, the Chinese Communist Party turned to political economic justifications for the temporary necessity and revolutionary utility of the socialist commodity, on the one hand, while promoting 'newborn socialist things' (*shehuizhuyi xinsheng shiwu*) as contemporary manifestations of the commodity-free communist future, on the other. That the notion of the newborn socialist thing was prey to many of the same problems as the commodity-form—including the evacuation of material specificity, for example—is a testament to the precariousness of the effort to replace the (capitalist) commodity and/or put it to work for the socialist project. This apparent difficulty to escape the commodity-form notwithstanding, Cultural Revolution newspapers, both the official Party organs as well as publications put out by Red Guard groups, are positively replete with exhortations to support (*zhichi*) newborn socialist things. For our purposes here, the success or failure of the endeavor to usurp the position of the commodity is ultimately less important than the strength of the desire to do so indicated by the prevalence of the term, a desire brought in part to fruition, in a rather ironic twist, in the form of the postsocialist Cultural Revolution object/souvenir.

If the souvenir is wrapped up in nostalgia, then, I would like to suggest that, in the case of Cultural Revolution collecting, that nostalgia is at least in part for an alternative mode of consumption—of interaction between person and thing—than is currently prevalent (and promoted) in the contemporary PRC. To purchase a Mao

²⁶ Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-century Britain and France* 69.

²⁷ Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*.

badge in this mode of collecting—to desire it, form an affective bond with it, and let it tell one’s story—is to engage with and enact a kind of ‘push-back’ against the commodity-form much sought after during the Mao period. Never mind that this ‘resistance’ (I use the term cautiously) is and was always incomplete. Nostalgia, as Stewart reminds us, is “the desire for desire.”²⁸ In this case, it takes the form of consumer desire for something other than consumer desire.

For all the negative portrayals of the dupe found in the pages of magazines like *Collections*, he is strangely self-aware as he grapples with this paradox, purchasing items with little regard for whether they are ‘authentic’ or ‘fake.’ If the desire to own is ultimately understood in terms of a desire for an alternative to ownership as a mode of person-thing interaction, such questions of ‘authenticity’ become largely irrelevant. Indeed, the priorities of the kind of connoisseurship espoused by the collector/curator and collector/investor are entirely inverted. What matters instead is the extent to which one can relate to any item—the extent to which it can ‘speak’ on one’s behalf—rather than some other, more ‘appropriate,’ curatorial and/or investitive concern. In this way, the purported dupe upends the implicit assumptions regarding value and valuation on which these other modes of collecting depend. The dupe ultimately values precisely that which the curatorial and investitive modes are, by their very nature, blind to: material specificity and its affective (Stewart might say ‘narratorial’) power. That the dupe must, in the end, translate his quest for this power into monetary terms is more a testament to the centrality that the (market) commodity-form and its consumption have in contemporary Chinese—and arguably, global—society than an indication of support for this system of valuation. There is no escaping the commodity—as this dissertation argues, perhaps there never really was. The question is, rather, how one deals with it, how one uses the commodity and the system of desire it produces and structures. The dupe and his souvenir are wrapped up in this endeavor, trying to yoke consumer desire to the pursuit of its antithesis.

Insofar as the collector/curator and collector/investor are constructed, as discursive figures, in contradistinction to the dupe, they are also dependent on him, as we have seen. In the case of the collector/investor, in particular, his very success as an investor is a function of his dealings with the dupe-as-dupe: the greater the discrepancy in their foresight and knowledge of the market, the greater the return on the investment. What this ultimately means, then, is that the curatorial and investitive modes of collecting are implicated in the nostalgic enterprise against which they are so vigorously and vocally opposed. On the one hand, the curator evaluates historical and pedagogical value as a function of what will reach his affectively susceptible audience. On the other hand, to invest is to speculate in things someone else will be willing to pay for, in what someone else will value. In this particular case, therefore, to invest in Cultural Revolution memorabilia is, in a sense, to foster the denial of the possibility of exchange even as the accrual of exchange value is the end goal.

²⁸ Stewart, *On Longing* 23.

I would like to conclude by suggesting, then, that in some ways, like the continued survival of the things themselves, the collection and consumption of Cultural Revolution memorabilia is, counterintuitively perhaps, ultimately a testament to how China has stayed the same over the past forty years, as opposed to how much it has changed. The myth of the great historical rupture (of 1976, of 1978, of 1989, of 1992...) and, indeed, the precarious nature of the 'post' in 'postsocialism,' are belied by continuities in the ways in which persons and things interact—or fantasies about the ways they interact—especially when those things trace their origins—and our own—back to the 'other side' of the theoretical temporal divide.

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