

Introduction

In the fall of 1974, Shanghai People's Press released *Storm at the Counter* (*Guitai fengbo*), a remarkable collection of new short stories.¹ Attributed to the Shanghai Number 1 Department Store composition group (Shanghaishi di yi baihuo shangdian chuangzuo zu), the collection comprises fictionalized accounts of retailers' experiences working in the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) oldest state-owned department store.² Taken as a whole, the volume reads like an implicit rejoinder to the notion that commerce and those who engage in it are ideologically suspect. The stories have something to prove—See! Retailers can be revolutionary too! On the one hand, this claim to revolutionary status is put forth on the basis of ongoing class struggle: Making revolution means discovering the malign influence behind an engaged couple's shopping spree, unmasking the black market profiteering ring at work in an old lady's purchases, and unraveling a renegade clerk's plot to steal from the store. With a pitched battle against capitalist restoration raging on both sides of the shop counter, retail workers present themselves as the tip of the proletarian spear to be applauded and encouraged. On the other hand, in addition to fending off class enemies, the Shanghai Number 1 retail force also attempts to distinguish itself in these stories through its dedication to diligently serving its worker-peasant-soldier (*gong nong bing*) clientele.

To this end, consider the practices described in "Pairing Socks" ("Pei wazi"), a story entirely devoted to one of the store's recent service initiatives.³ A student worker in the sock department, Xiao Fang, arrives at his new post just as an initiative is getting off the ground. In response to a suggestion from "the masses," the sock department now does more than sell pairs of socks; it also sells singles. Should a customer have only one sock—perhaps the other

has been lost or is too worn to be darned—the customer can drop off the solitary good sock at the store. Store staff will then take it upon themselves to match said used sock with a new one, forming a now wearable pair at half the price.⁴ It is a tremendously labor-intensive process, Xiao Fang soon learns. Master Bu, who seems to be something of a sock whisperer, makes clear that matches must be made in terms of color, yes, but also thread count and thickness, length of cuff, pattern, and general size. Should the store's own sock inventory not yield a match, one must be pursued elsewhere, either in other stores or in factory remnants. Xiao Fang and Master Bu, for example, visit a local sock factory in search of a pattern no longer carried by Shanghai Number 1. Tellingly, they are warmly received at the factory as fellow proletarian workers.

The ardent spirit of service encapsulated in this story is closely tied to a much-touted contemporaneous expansion of the store's purview, which included not only selling goods but repairing, replacing, renting, and recycling them as well.⁵ By 1975, store cadres publicly claimed to offer more than 180 such services, ranging from advice on removing stains to collecting spent toothpaste tubes.⁶ In each case, the retailers were said to put the masses' convenience (*fangbian qunzhong*) ahead of the profit motive, thereby further distinguishing themselves from capitalist purveyors. In the mid-1970s, this, alongside the omnipotence of the centralized plan, is what supposedly defined China's commercial sector as socialist. All these demonstrable "advancements" were consequently promoted as "newborn socialist things" (*shehuizhuyi xinsheng shiwu*).

Although it is now colloquially used in the more general sense of an emerging phenomenon, as a technical term, expounded by party theorist Sun Dingguo (1910–64) in 1959, "newborn thing" was not to be deployed in reference to a passing fad. Newborn things, by definition, were necessarily much more consequential than that. Specifically, they had to pass four tests: They had to struggle against "old things" (*jiu shiwu*); forge their own path; be in accordance with developmental principles; and have a long, bright future. Only then could something earn (*yingde*) the right to be called a newborn thing.⁷ At once emblems of their own time and heralds of the future, newborn things were therefore understood—especially in the wake of Mao Zedong's (1893–1976) 1957 disquisition "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People"—as a key engine of history's forward progress. Newborn things' struggle with old things was particularly crucial to the creation of a developmental dialectic whereby the struggle itself would help pave the way for ever newer—and therefore ever more advanced—newborn things.⁸ Indeed, this evolutionary process was ultimately rooted in a notion of planned obsolescence. Newborn feudalist things inevitably became old things under

capitalism; newborn capitalist things became the object of socialist struggle; and one day, with the arrival of the communist Promised Land, even newborn socialist things would become dangerously outdated.

Of course, at the time of Sun's canonical essay and at least until Mao's death in 1976, the future was not meant to look like what we see in China today, a condition sometimes deemed to be postsocialist. Postsocialism, loosely defined as an economic and cultural shift away from the direct control of a Leninist party-state to the purportedly autonomous workings of global capitalist markets, could never constitute historical advancement.⁹ A perversion of the developmental assumptions of the revolution, a resurgence of capitalism could be seen only in revisionist terms as a kind of backward historical motion. Anything associated with such retrogradation was, necessarily, an old thing. Indeed, the identification and destruction of old things of this type—especially when they pretended to be newly emergent—became one of the major focal points of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Newborn things pointed the way forward such that the only possible progressive post-socialism was communism.¹⁰

We arguably still see traces of this attitude in the PRC's official pursuit of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi*). Although contemporary Chinese socialism is increasingly seen as a misnomer—the party's vain attempt to maintain ideological appearances despite, for all intents and purposes, having given up the dream of a communist future—here, the claim to socialism remains significant in and of itself. It speaks to a fraught relationship with the Maoist past, its unfulfilled promises, and its ongoing legacy in a way that the arguably more accurate economic descriptor "capitalism with Chinese characteristics" does not. What happens, to that end, if we begin to take seriously the purported capaciousness of a Chinese socialism that, as an experience and an idea, successfully encompasses the apogee of Maoist fervor, the Cultural Revolution, and the increasingly extreme marketization of the early twenty-first century? How, for example, might that change the way we think of contemporary China's service sector and its relationship to Shanghai Number 1 Department Store's newborn socialist things of yesteryear? What would it mean, moreover, to truly think of that relationship as a dialectic?

It may be argued that such an expansive understanding of Chinese socialism effectively stretches the notion beyond its breaking point, that in order for it to be applicable to such radically different historical circumstances as the Cultural Revolution and the current cultural moment, it must also apply to everything and therefore mean nothing. Perhaps. But even if only as a short-lived thought experiment, I believe this approach, especially vis-à-vis what initially appear to be the trappings of the Chinese turn *away* from the

Mao period, can nonetheless prove productive in recapturing the richness and contradictions that have always already been part of the Chinese socialist condition. Chinese socialism has always been something of a moving target.

This study essentially constitutes a wager—of considerable time and energy both on my part and the reader’s—that the movement of that target is worth mapping, particularly during the period just prior to the onset of market reforms in the late 1970s and 1980s: the Cultural Revolution. In the pages that follow, then, I pursue a line of inquiry suggested by the concept of the newborn socialist thing itself, its expansiveness and heterogeneity, its ambiguous relationship to the material world, and its anticipated usurpation of historically dominant forms of interaction, like the commodity. More precisely, my focus is the media environment of the Cultural Revolution and the ways in which its constituent elements engaged with contemporaneous discourses of materiality and material culture.

A Brief History of the Newborn Thing

The fight against the old has become a critical component of the popular imagination of the Cultural Revolution, especially abroad. The campaign to “smash the Four Olds” (*po sijiu*), at the high tide of Red Guard activity (1966–68), has proved remarkably compelling for such imaginings and is consistently blamed for the widespread destruction of Chinese cultural heritage perpetrated during this period—cultural heritage that must now be recovered or reinvented in various ways. Most notable for my purposes here is the fact that this loss is typically represented in material terms. Consider the iconic photograph of burning Buddhist relics or depictions of the literal smashing of objects in posters promoting the campaign (see figure 1.1). This despite the fact that the Four Olds were, at least explicitly, very little concerned with material particularities. Lest we forget, each of the Four Olds—old customs (*fengsu*), old culture (*wenhua*), old habits (*xiguan*), and old ideas (*sixiang*)—seems much more preoccupied with behavior than concrete objects in isolation. Indeed, it is easy to see why, when each “old” is so abstract and difficult to disentangle from the other three, they were typically referred to as a group. In the aggregate, the Four Olds became all-encompassing, an umbrella term on a par with the equally expansive “old things,” itself a rhetorical holdover from the late 1950s. I would suggest, in fact, that we consider the two terms as part of the same larger, tempestuous history of negotiating the past that has always been at the heart of socialist construction as a political project. For although the notion of the Four Olds may have been short-lived, the Four Olds themselves, like the “old things” targeted before and after

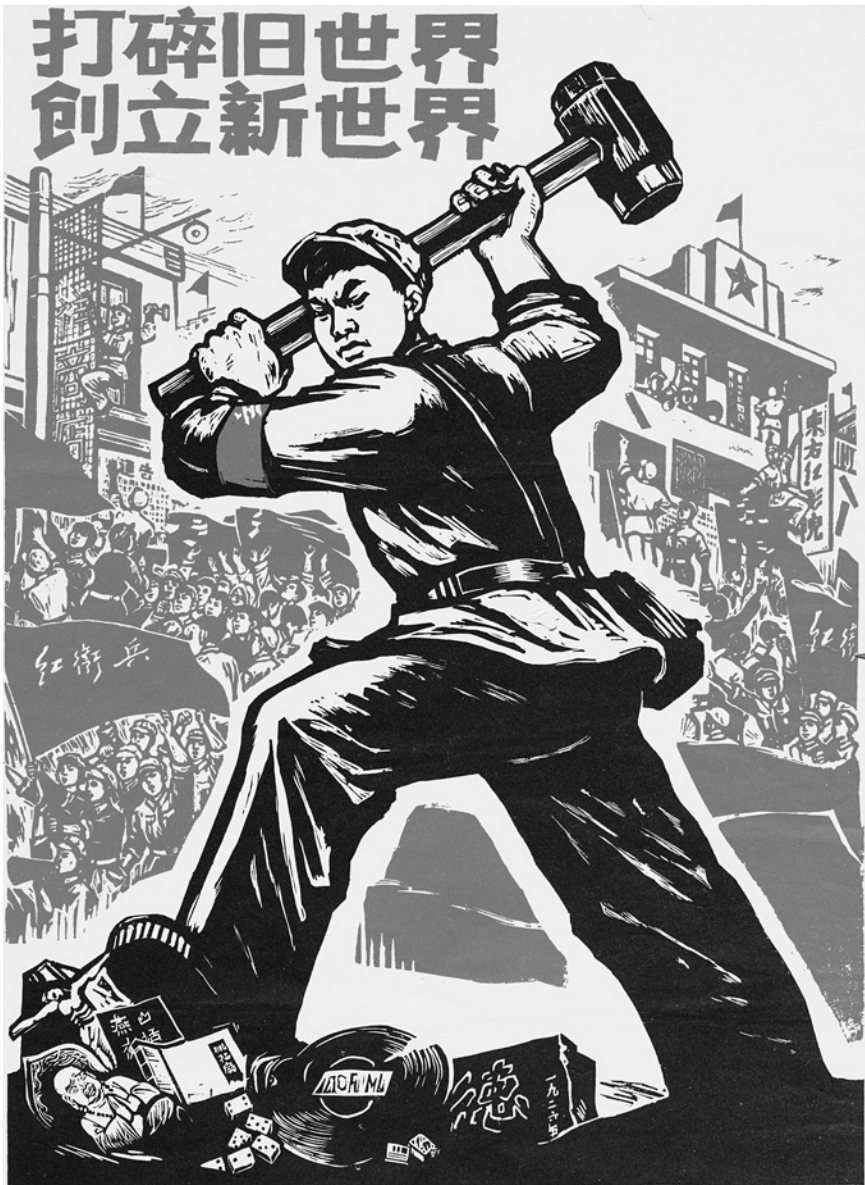


Figure I.1 “SHATTER THE OLD WORLD, BUILD A NEW WORLD,” poster (unsigned), circa 1967, 37 by 26 centimeters. International Institute of Social History / Stefan R. Landsberger Collection, chinese posters.net.

them, were pitted against a class of forward-looking “newborn things” in very much the same way.

This should alert us to the fact that, in a sense, both old and newborn things were, as a rule, remarkably un-thing-like. More precisely, we might say that they tested, stretched, and exceeded the bounds of materiality. They are perhaps best thought of as constellations—of objects and bodies brought into relation with each other, of institutions produced by and through those objects and bodies, and of the social formations they helped to construct. In other words, instead of distinguishing an object from its production, usage, and discursive apparatus, an old or newborn thing brought all these together into a single conceptual entity, comprising both human and nonhuman actors. Defining the boundaries of a particular thing therefore becomes a matter of scale—of how many connections one wishes to trace.¹¹ A salesclerk pairing socks or a peasant driving a tractor could be thought of as a newborn thing in this sense, but so could collectivization writ large. By the same token, the smashing of the Four Olds, as abstract as those Four Olds may initially seem, in practice could be equated with the smashing of physical objects, the dismantling of institutions, and the reconfiguring of social relations. In theory, at least, the capaciousness of the old or newborn thing—now so much more than a mere object—unified all these facets under one conceptual roof. Thus, in his famous “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People,” mentioned above, Mao could refer to the agricultural collective as a newborn thing, and two years later, Sun Dingguo could likewise tout the recently formed people’s communes as the most glorious of newborn things to date.¹²

When progressive constellations emerged in the old society they were promptly quashed, a consequence of the natural threat they posed to the status quo. Under socialism, by contrast, newborn things were now to be nurtured in order that they might take root and grow. Moreover, they had to be defended from the many class enemies who would see them crushed underfoot. Fully articulated during the years of the Great Leap Forward (1958–60)—and further buoyed by the unbridled optimism of the time—properly carrying out one’s responsibilities toward newborn socialist things became one of a good communist’s chief concerns. In some ways it was a remarkably easy job since, at the end of the day, newborn things were, by definition, guaranteed to prevail over the old things of the pre-revolutionary era. The Sun Dingguo essay to which I have been referring, for example, is tellingly titled “Newborn Things Are Invincible” (“Xinsheng shiwu shi bu ke zhansheng de”). Even so, overconfidence and complacency would not do either. For all his bombastic assurances of victory, then, Sun also has to strike a more cautionary note: Although the new would necessarily win out over the old in the long run,

vigilance still needed to be maintained on a day-to-day basis.¹³ There was no room for historical fatalism.

This tricky two-step 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 President Liu Shaoqi's (1898–1969) 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 and opposition to the Four Olds and old things.¹⁴ The official press also increasingly began using this terminology to refer to “advancements” in many areas, including progress in the arts. It was not 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 (*Pi Lin pi Kong*) in 1973 and the arrest of the Gang of Four—Jiang Qing (1914–91), Zhang Chunqiao (1917–2005), Yao Wenyuan (1931–2005), and Wang Hongwen (1935–92)—in 1976, during which time the most radical elements in the party were trying to retain or regain power. Their chief concern in these years 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* (*Renmin ribao*) 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.¹⁵

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

One of the most intriguing formations with which the newborn things of the Cultural Revolution were to coexist and do battle was the commodity (*shangpin*)—or, more precisely, the commodity form—as described in the opening chapter of Karl Marx's *Capital*. According to a 1974 dictionary of political economic terms, a commodity is something consumed by someone other than its producer and acquired through exchange. That exchange is made possible by the commodity form's dual nature, which brings together use value and exchange value, as a function of labor power measured in labor time. "Thus, 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*]."¹⁶ It is a familiar definition that nonetheless tells us little about the appropriate role—or lack thereof—of the commodity under (Chinese) socialism. Indeed, while the eventual withering away of the commodity would coincide, according to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's pronouncements, with the arrival of communism, a number of key questions about what should happen in the interim were left maddeningly open by canonical communist theoreticians.¹⁷ There were many gaps to fill in the study and practice of political economy, including the reinvention and demystification of holdovers from the ancien régime, most notably, the commodity and its close cousin, money. These tasks were undertaken in the PRC 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 learning to distinguish what was retrograde (in order to keep it in check) from what was progressive (in order to encourage its growth).¹⁸

Indeed, I would suggest it is no accident that the briefest of histories of the newborn socialist thing outlined above in many ways mirrors the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) contentious history of negotiation with the (socialist) commodity. The two stories are rhetorically and conceptually linked. During the Cultural Revolution, if not before, socialist commodities and newborn socialist things often formed a developmental dialectic in precisely these terms. Consider Mao's assertion, made only a month before the article quoted above, that the socialist economy was "a commodity system."¹⁹ Or consider the fact that, whereas socialist retailing and its innovations—for example, pairing customers' used socks—may have been hailed as newborn things, the (socialist) commodity form per se, as opposed to its exchange and circulation, was seen as a danger to socialism even as it helped to build it.²⁰ The commodity under socialism was a critical advance, to be sure, 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.

The connection between the commodity form and newborn socialist things also extends well beyond this dialectic, however. At base, each constitutes an arguably failed attempt to grapple with the same problem: How does one bridge the gap between material specificity and social relations without subsuming one into the other? As I argue in this book, in the early 1970s the threat posed to socialism by the commodity form—that is, its latent potential to pull history backward—was rooted in a suspicion that its defining capitalist relations of production could not be wholly overcome. This was true even in a PRC in which such social relations had been dramatically altered by revolution and were constantly demystified by the popularization of Marxist political economic theory. Still, the latter project remained an important way to manage the destabilizing danger of the commodity, and it is particularly key here because, as a coping mechanism, it relied on discourse and abstraction, leaving material specificity by the wayside. As for the newborn socialist thing, it could counter the dangerous relationality of the commodity dialectically with its own appropriately future-oriented relationality, but doing so discursively seems to have come at a tremendous cost to it as well, namely, at the cost of its materiality. For although newborn socialist things were theoretically conceived as comprising constellations of objects, people, and practices—of merging the material and the social—the objects within those constellations were also consistently overlooked. One notes, for example, that the newborn things enumerated in the aforementioned *People's Daily* article show little to no concern for the objects these newborn things purportedly encompass. Materiality is conveniently jettisoned, thereby effectively reproducing the very problem it was meant to solve. In this sense,

the newborn socialist thing, meant to form a developmental dialectic with the commodity form, could not break free of its mold; it could not seem to square the material specificity–social relations circle in a fundamentally different way. As a result, it became difficult to imagine concrete new social relations in anything other than the commodity form—despite that having been the goal.

Given all this—given what would appear to be a crucial flaw in the historical deployment of the newborn socialist thing as a concept—it may seem a rather odd source of inspiration for a book such as this. But in truth, it is not the actual usage of the term in the Cultural Revolution that primarily interests me. Rather, I am more interested in the potential it holds as a way of thinking about interactions among people and things. What would it 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? What new affinities could we see? And how would that change our understanding of Chinese socialism? This study attempts to answer these questions by examining Cultural Revolution media systems, their constituent elements and forms, because when we think about media relationally—especially when we do so in terms of equivalence and exchange—we begin to see deep connections with the commodity, connections that have hitherto gone unnoticed.

The Political Economy of Mediation

In *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*, film historian Paul Clark traces the complex lineages of the period’s key performances and cinematic works, illustrating at length just how far from a cultural wasteland the decade actually was. In fact, the richness and sheer pervasiveness of the period’s cultural production prompts the following observation: “The commercial commodification of culture that has characterized Chinese artistic life in the last quarter-century was made possible by the ideological commodification of culture in the Cultural Revolution.”²¹ The implications of this statement are not fully explored in Clark’s work, nor for that matter is the notion of the “ideological commodification of culture” wholly unpacked. But what makes this claim so potent is not some new, implied typology of commodification so much as the recognition on which the claim is predicated, namely, that there is a formal similarity between the radically intermedial proliferation and endless repetition of what might loosely be called “official cultural production”—rhetoric, sound, images, objects, and performances directly produced or tacitly endorsed by the CCP cultural and propaganda apparatus—during the Cultural Revolution and the ways in which commodities circulate and multiply.

The expansive notion of the newborn socialist thing—as a habit of mind and critical lens—is helpful here insofar as it allows us to investigate this fundamental insight, precisely by conceptually bringing together that which is typically kept separate, when acknowledged at all: official Cultural Revolution–era cultural production and the workings of the (socialist) commodity. The justification for the conventional separation of these two spheres is, more often than not, quite simply provided by the fact that economic considerations, like production costs or potential returns on investment, were seldom, if ever, meant to enter into the equation when making socialist culture. Why, then, worry about such things now? The implication is that doing so would in some sense be missing the point. The areas of overlap, influence, and collision of the official cultural realm and the commodity explored in this book, however, are not as straightforward as all that. I do not wish to venture into discussions of the *economics of culture*, for lack of a better term, or otherwise restrict myself to adjudicating the commodity status of any particular cultural work. The promise of the newborn socialist thing lies elsewhere—specifically, it allows us to identify and articulate a cluster of formal, relational affinities and logics operative in both the cultural and the economic domains.

The sprawling scope of this goal accounts for my emphasis on the commodity form and its permutations in the Cultural Revolution rather than on tracing the production, circulation, and consumption of particular commodities. As a function of this, I am less interested in actual, historical economic activity than in the formation of an avowedly socialist field of political economy, its theories, contradictions, and material manifestations. To that end, it bears repeating here that the making of socialist culture and the making of socialist political economy were very much contemporaneous projects. One might even go so far as to say that they were two sides of the same coin, that coin being the forging and negotiation of new social relations across the board. The language of political economy was particularly crucial insofar as it provided explanations and alibis for an array of phenomena that, though proudly labeled as socialist, looked suspiciously capitalist, the continued reliance on commodities chief among them. In other words, political economic justifications were a very effective way of giving apparently old things a new lease on life. Taking these justifications seriously, then, means forcing ourselves to consider the relationship between culture and political economy differently and, notably, more expansively than has hitherto been done with regard to the Cultural Revolution.

I have found inspiration for this endeavor in a number of unexpected places, including in studies of English and American literature by Walter Benn Michaels, Lynn Festa, and Jonathan Lamb.²² I say “unexpected” simply because of the

manifest historical and cultural distance between these scholars' immediate subject matter and mine. Putting this issue to the side for the moment, each of these literary critics has succeeded in doing what I aim to do here: They have sussed out the political economic in the cultural and vice versa, isolating common problematics of identity, personhood, and ownership, among others. I will touch on some of these areas myself, particularly as they concern bodies and subjectivities (chapters 5 and 6), but my primary focus remains the question of relationality itself. More specifically, my focus lies on the prescriptive form of relationality constitutive of both the commodity form and the material construction of Chinese socialist culture.

I approach this particular form of relationality in terms of *mediation*, a notion I invoke with a view to the word's multiple associations in common parlance. First, *mediation* is often used in reference to media—to that which media *do* in a performative sense—and to the extent that Clark's original observation pertains to the proliferation, circulation, and repetition of mass media objects, including films and recorded sound (chapter 1), this implicit connection is crucial. Indeed, one of the things that sets the Cultural Revolution apart from the Mao era is the increased number of people (especially those in or of the cities) for whom the mass media were an integral part of daily life. That said, I approach media and the cultural work of mediation in purposefully broad material terms, terms so broad, in fact, that mediation must really be understood as a situationally derived function of materiality as such. This sense of context-driven functionality is grounded in the second notion of mediation as processes of in-between-ness, in other words, as that which makes particular relations not only *possible* in the abstract but *operative* in a given situation. And here it is worth noting that these relations need not necessarily be friendly, nor indeed need the processes by which relations are enacted be smooth. When one mediates a conflict, for example, one tries to bridge a gap between two or more parties; the bigger the gap, the more work is required to overcome it. Mediation, in this sense, while dialogic by definition, can also be dialectical insofar as it is processual and, at least potentially, the stuff of opposition and contradiction.

This understanding of mediation clearly applies to monetized systems of commodity exchange, which are grounded in a process that renders one thing equal to another in terms of something else. This situation is crystalized in the commodity form, which, as Marx taught us, is, at its core, relational: The commodity form implies and engenders social relations between individuals as well as material relations between things.²³ That the former is regularly effaced by the latter is, famously, Marx's explanation for commodity fetishism (the focus of chapters 3 and 4). What is of interest to me here, however, is the way in which the relational nature of the commodity form makes it

particularly promiscuous. The kind of mediation it emblemizes and facilitates is difficult to limit to the realm of actual exchange or to quantify with the standard tools of economics as an empirical discipline. Mediation crosses boundaries by virtue of its very structure; in order to get the full measure of the commodity form—whether capitalist or socialist—we must do so as well.

If this discussion of mediation and the commodity form smacks of ahistorical or universalist abstraction, allow me to clarify at the outset that my goal in this study is to explore the *material—and therefore culturally and historically specific—articulations* of this type of relationality in the Cultural Revolution. Remarking on the promiscuity of the commodity form is a condition of possibility for this investigation, not its end point. The implications of doing so, however, are intentionally wide-ranging, for the historiographic stakes of fully grappling with the socialist commodity, let alone mediation in the context of the newborn socialist thing, are unquestionably high. Despite popular conceptions of the Cultural Revolution as both a cultural and a commodity desert, there is little doubt that the political economic order of the day—even for the most radical faction of the CCP during the Cultural Revolution, the Gang of Four, and their followers—was not the elimination of commodities, but rather, monitoring their appropriate function. In short, the dangers posed by commodities, including commodity fetishism and revisionism, needed to be properly managed, that is to say, with an eye to the communist future.

This compromise should sound familiar; determining the appropriate role of the commodity under Chinese (post)socialism continues to be a difficult task for the CCP. And yet, the ongoing nature of this struggle is regularly ignored in favor of a historiographic narrative positing the commodity's sudden emergence in the era of reforms. In his treatment of the “Mao craze” (*Mao re*) of the early 1990s—a fad that 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, that they present no imminent danger to the party Mao had once nearly destroyed from within. Rendered as 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?”²⁴ For Dutton, the commodified Mao can neither challenge nor be challenged, to the detriment of all. This understanding is predicated on the notion that the commodification of Mao is a wholly new phenomenon, but what if it weren't? What if we approached the proliferation and circulation of Mao's likeness during the Cultural Revolution through the lens of mediation à la commodity form? What if the millions

of Mao badges produced in the late 1960s, for instance, were understood as more than a cult of personality run amok? What if they spoke to the fact that Mao has been commodity-like, if not precisely a commodity per se, 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 (1904–97) market reforms. Indeed, they were recognized and criticized as such, even as they remained integral to the socialist enterprise and the logic of the commodity continued to suffuse everyday life in the Cultural Revolution. Although the material conditions of daily existence have undoubtedly changed dramatically for many Chinese in recent decades, that underlying logic persists to this day. What this ultimately means, then, is that we need to reevaluate what we think we know about Chinese socialism, commodities, and the way they continue to inform and resonate through the interactions of media, people, and things. At a time when commodities were regarded with suspicion as threats to the socialist enterprise, how and to what extent did the workings of the highly saturated, Cultural Revolution media environment nonetheless activate and engage the unsettling potential of the commodity form? How did the constituent parts of this increasingly omnipresent media environment—LPs, radio broadcasts, films, lantern slides, newspapers, magazines, comic books, posters, paper cuts, porcelain figurines, wallets, product packaging, ornamented mirrors, household appliances, and human bodies, to name just a few—themselves participate in that process? To what extent do they bear the imprint of that participation? And how might that impact the way we understand these media objects and their role in the construction of Chinese socialism then and now?

A Material (Re)turn

These motivating questions—and my attempts to respond to them in the coming pages—enact a material (re)turn of sorts—back to the specific media and particular objects of a historical and cultural moment. I find the notion of the newborn socialist thing helpful, as I suggest above, insofar as it has the potential to effect just such a (re)turn in combination with an emphasis on mediation—on material, social, and political economic relationality—and/as historical development. Basic as it may seem, the (re)introduction of material concerns constitutes a much-needed departure from the heretofore dominant approach to Cultural Revolution culture. Consider, for example, the existing scholarship on one of the mainstays of the media of this period, the so-called *yangbanxi*. A notoriously tricky term to translate, the word was

coined in 1966 to refer to a group of five Beijing operas, two ballets, and one symphonic work intended to be the vanguard of the performing arts revolution.²⁵ More precisely, as *yangban* (models)—a term first used in the context of agricultural fields during the Great Leap Forward—these pieces were endorsed as exemplars of what the socialist arts could be. Yangbanxi therefore initially denoted a status—in contradistinction to *shiyaxi* (experimental performances)—more than a repertoire, though it has since acquired the latter connotation.²⁶ Each work was meticulously crafted and relentlessly revised, often over a period of many years, under the auspices of Jiang Qing, Mao's third wife and a former Shanghai actress. By 1976, a total of eighteen works had earned the "model" designation, with the original eight yangbanxi, in particular, holding an unparalleled position of prominence within the official cultural sphere.

In keeping with their cultural importance, the yangbanxi have been the subject of considerable scholarship over the past few decades, most of it written in Chinese by PRC researchers.²⁷ 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 value to literary and film scholars.²⁸ Despite its Cold War inflections, this stance is understandable insofar as the approach typically deployed in the analysis of these works has, more often than not, heavily relied on symbolic readings. Explicitly designed in adherence to a totalizing system of signification—the yangbanxi were models precisely because their every aspect was ideologically and semiotically overdetermined—attempts to decode the yangbanxi in semiotic terms tend (unwittingly?) to reproduce official CCP interpretations. In other words, these works were meant to be read in a manner very much in keeping with the majority of contemporary scholarship, and as a result, it should not surprise us to discover that such scholarship tends to emphasize the univocality and self-evident simplicity of the yangbanxi. The model works are merely operating the way they were meant to operate, yielding a very particular reading as a product of a particular hermeneutic approach. In humanistic disciplines that valorize and thrive on polysemy and ambiguity, like literary and film studies, the yangbanxi have therefore often seemed too readily interpretable, too manifestly easy to understand, to be worthy of our attention.

Rather than casting aside these works—and the realm of official cultural production to which they belong—what is required is a new approach that does not jibe quite so neatly with the Cultural Revolution's prescriptive modes of reading. In a sense, we need to learn to willfully mis-read and mis-interpret in a way that is nonetheless culturally and historically informed. Enter the newborn socialist thing. More specifically, my gambit in this book is that a renewed attention to the material specificity of official cultural

products, broadly construed, and to the work of mediation in which they are engaged affords us just such a possibility, and it does so, ultimately, with great implications for our understanding of Chinese socialism past and present.

Again, the yangbanxi are a case in point, for their reach extended well beyond the professional performing arts of stage and screen. As part of the popularization campaign, begun in 1970, that resulted in the films extant today, yangbanxi-related paraphernalia was produced spanning every conceivable media form, including those discussed in the pages that follow: recorded sound (chapter 1), porcelain statuettes (chapter 3), amateur performance (chapter 5), and mirrors (chapter 6). Little of the interest the yangbanxi have garnered thus far has sought to address either the proliferation of yangbanxi ancillaries or the material environment in which yangbanxi were shown or performed.²⁹ Rather, as I have suggested above, the yangbanxi have generally been treated semiotically 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 apparently dematerialized signs. In point of fact, however, we know that the model works and their related objects took on particular media forms and were experienced (and interacted with each other) 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 in this way is to lose sight of the film as film, the plate as plate, and their fundamental material incommensurability.

As Bjørnar Olsen notes, this is a danger present in all purely semiotic approaches to things, but it is especially problematic in the context of the Cultural Revolution, where the reduction of material things to abstract signs threatens to forsake the experiential in the name of highly crafted official discourse.³⁰ By overlooking the level at which a thing was interacted with, that is, the thing as thing, one is left precisely with the system 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 also be something on which one might eat. In this particular case, then, a de facto blindness to things does more than restrict our hermeneutic horizons: It also 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, *Newborn Socialist Things* seeks to turn this notion on its head. Examining cultural products as materially specific components of the Cultural Revolution media environment—that is, maintaining their “robust

materiality” as a source of meaning, as Krisztina Fehérváry puts it³¹—forces us to ask a fundamentally different type of question: What did yangbanxi ancillaries mean, but also, *how* did they mean it? What did they do, and *how* did they do it? How did different media interact with one another, and what kind of subjectivities did these interactions make possible? Note that these are not precisely questions of audience reception, a topic that presents significant methodological challenges at the best of times. Trying to get a handle on the reception of official cultural works in the Cultural Revolution is a veritable methodological minefield.³² Instead, what I carry out in this book remains a hermeneutic enterprise at heart, and in that sense it, too, is invested in semiotics. My reliance on *mediation* as a notion as opposed to, say, an economy of signification, however, is intended to foreground the materiality of the sign, not to efface it. This study is thus every bit an interpretative project but one in which I nonetheless approach media and discursive objects as materially specific, interactive, and productive.

That being said, I remain mindful of two particularly insidious pitfalls. First, there is the issue of whose materiality is at stake: whose vocabulary—whose ontological and epistemological frameworks—can we call on as we seek to engage the material specificity of this historical moment? On the one hand, we must be careful not to simply reproduce—much as I have just accused other approaches of doing—socialist discourses about things and, by extension, about the circulation and consumption of state-socialist goods. While the goal may be to engage 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.”³³ With this in mind, Fehérváry, for one, makes very pointed, often anachronistic use of such terms as “branding” and “commodities” in her work on the material culture of socialist Hungary, a move that is in keeping with much of the scholarship on socialist consumer culture in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.³⁴ 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/postcommunist nostalgia or, in (East) Germany, *Ostalgie*.³⁵ 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,³⁶ “in which the absence of a ‘capitalist’ economy somehow implic[s] the absence of consumer culture—with its accompanying panoply of dreams and frustrations, forms of sociality, and social distinctions.”³⁷ Within this context, the use of such terms as *consumer culture*, *brand*, and *commodity* is purposefully ahistorical in the

name of scholarly intervention, but we must be cognizant that this tactic has its own risks, namely, of merely replacing one theoretical apparatus, equally unconcerned with the historical thingness of things, with another.

I attempt to negotiate this dilemma in a manner suggested by the newborn thing itself, that is, by juxtaposing objects with contemporary discourses of materiality (and political economy) in order to consider them in relation to each other. I therefore deploy the notion of the commodity, for example, in a manner and with an aim very different from Fehérváry. My goal here is to examine and recuperate the term as it was used during the Cultural Revolution rather than as a destabilizing and decentering mechanism. 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—through the examination of particular objects—are principle motivations for this investigation. That Marx's theory of the commodity figures prominently in this book should not be surprising, then, for it is precisely this theory that informed the materials under examination, and its shortcomings were no less frustrating in the Cultural Revolution than they are to us today—which is exactly the point.

The second major pitfall threatening this study and its incipient material (re)turn is all the more serious for being more fundamental than the first. Regardless of the discourse I ultimately deploy, the underlying tendency of language to usurp the place of things remains.³⁸ I am, after all, engaged in a linguistic act; I am writing—have written—a book, one comprising material elements, true, but mostly one comprising words. Much as I may peg my scholarly project in contradistinction to those exclusively reliant on symbolic texts, then, at the end of the day I must own that I am as hamstrung by the semiotic structure of language as anyone. And though I seek to use the notion of the newborn socialist thing in a way that fulfills its potential to think the material with the social, I must also own that the historical failure to consistently do so offers little hope for prolonged success. In Elaine Freedgood's words, "We cannot outsmart our own forms; indeed, we can scarcely read them."³⁹ It may well be that the best we can collectively hope for is to disturb, however fleetingly, not just the totalizing claims of a particular discourse but of discourse tout court. This, then, is my goal here—undertaken with a little help from my material friends.⁴⁰

Harnessing the Fugitive

Faced with a similar linguistic predicament in her study of things in the mid-Victorian novel, Freedgood proposes an albeit temporary recourse to metonymy in an attempt to stave off the substitutive logic of metaphor. That is, she is principally interested not in what a thing stands for or represents—mahogany furniture as merely an avatar of Jane Eyre's newly acquired wealth, for example—but, rather, in the constellation of relations in which a given thing, literally rendered, participates (as part of a larger whole). To read a realist novel metonymically is, for Freedgood, a way out and beyond, a way to unsettle and complicate: “Metaphor defines and stabilizes; metonymy keeps on going, in any and all directions. It threatens: to disrupt categories, to open up too many possibilities, to expose things hidden.”⁴¹ As a methodology, metonymy involves chasing fugitive connections and going down rabbit holes. This is precisely what makes metonymy so potently unruly and the reason why, ultimately, we must rely on metaphor to rein it in, to foreclose its seemingly endless array of options.⁴² As scholars, we prioritize some texts and case studies above others; in order to communicate an idea with relative clarity, we use conventionally circumscribed language—in this case, printed and bound between the two covers of this book—to build a directional argument with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Metonymy may well offer a reprieve from these strictures—of language, of thought, of representation—but it cannot last. In the end, metaphor will always win the day.

Freedgood's metonymic reading has much in common with the methodological inspiration I am drawing from the newborn socialist thing and its seemingly limitless capacity for relational expansion. The newborn socialist thing is also unruly, testing the bounds of conceptual and material cohesion, and it, too, must ultimately be brought to heel in the name of linguistic and argumentational conventions. This inescapability notwithstanding, my hope is that the purposeful combination of tracing fugitive connections and the substitutive imperative of language, deployed in methodological tandem, can itself be a productive tack. I would like to suggest that our recourse to metaphor, inevitable as it may be, need not necessarily be understood as metonymy's failure in Freedgood's sense. Indeed, my emphasis on mediation very much depends on our ability to read both metaphorically *and* metonymically, to pay attention to relations of exchange and equivalence as well as the material incommensurabilities on which such relations rely. On the one hand, the following chapters engage—through the crucial notions of the newborn socialist thing and mediation—not with a group of literary texts but with a historical and cultural period: the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Whereas Freedgood concerns herself with textual interpretation through a process

of literalizing, and then fanning out from, the material objects referenced within a novel's pages, I am interested in what the material components of a media environment can tell us, through what amounts to a similarly rhizomatic approach, about a historical moment. On the other hand, insofar as this study is interested in how that media environment was structured and how it shared a formal affinity with commodity exchange and the commodity form, substitutional logic is more than inevitable; it is also invaluable. I could not approach Chinese (post)socialism—past and present—as a developmental dialectic of old and newborn things without it.

Having said that, the inclusion of the fugitive in my methodology in this way has had two important consequences for the structure of this study, both of which should be mentioned here. First, there is the question of periodization. Throughout *Newborn Socialist Things*, I refer to the Cultural Revolution as the decade spanning May 1966, when the movement was officially endorsed by the politburo, to the arrest of the Gang of Four in October 1976. This is in keeping with the periodization endorsed by the CCP in its 1981 verdict on party history, but it is not without its drawbacks.⁴³ On the one hand, the Cultural Revolution was officially brought to an end at the Ninth Party Congress in 1969, and indeed, the 1970s did not witness anywhere near the level of open chaos and destruction that characterized the ascent of Red Guard factionalism in 1967. Moreover, many sectors of the economy, including the publishing and film industries, resumed operation in the early 1970s after being shut down in the late 1960s, meaning that the media environment of the former varied quite significantly from the latter. The ten-year periodization therefore elides differences that a narrower designation—from 1966 to 1969—would serve to highlight. On the other hand, there is an argument to be made that the Cultural Revolution never really existed as a discrete historical formation, even in the late 1960s. What we conventionally call the Cultural Revolution merely corresponds to a handful of disparate political campaigns—in a very long series of such campaigns—targeting cultural reform. I have decided to deploy the 1981 designation largely because it is still dominant in the PRC (and abroad) today, but I remain very cognizant of its constructed, if not wholly arbitrary, nature as a heuristic. In fact, my approach here consistently draws attention to the porousness of temporal boundaries even as I invoke them rhetorically. I spend much of my time tracing connections back in time, before the beginning of the Cultural Revolution proper, such as I have defined it. This is by design.

Second, given the newborn thing's penchant for the contingent, the media and exempla I examine in the following six chapters may at times seem strange or unmotivated. They require a plethora of interpretive tools, usually deemed the purview of disparate disciplines. But insofar as this variety none-

theless manages to produce a compelling account of a historical moment and its relationship with the China of today, this, too, is by design. To be sure, my choice of materials is not entirely haphazard; I have selected examples that are central to and emblematic of the workings of the media environment and commodity economy of the Cultural Revolution. Even so, this seems as good a place as any to own the role of serendipity in determining the final shape of this project. To the extent that the crux of my methodology—as inspired by the newborn thing—is thinking *with* or *through* things rather than speaking straightforwardly on their behalf, then the apparently contingent structure of this book is very much as it should be. *Newborn Socialist Things* does not claim to be exhaustive. Instead, it focuses on objects and texts that have spoken to me such that I have felt compelled to engage them—to work with and through them—here.

The Road Ahead

The six chapters that follow are loosely grouped into sets of two, each exploring forms of mediation related to conceptual tensions at the heart of the Cultural Revolution as a period and the newborn socialist thing as a critical lens. Although the chapters also resonate with one another beyond these pairings, my hope is that these groupings help create a more navigable structure for the reader. Taken together, chapters 1 and 2 focus on issues of modernization and developmental progress as measured through access to media technologies and consumer commodities, respectively. In the first instance, demands for newness mapped quite easily onto socialism. The second instance proved much more difficult to negotiate. Chapters 3 and 4 then examine this negotiation with an eye to the relationship between ideological discourse and materiality. What makes a socialist thing socialist? What makes it a thing? I address these questions from the vantage points of productivist commodity display and political economic texts meant to counteract commodity fetishism. Finally, chapters 5 and 6 take us from things to bodies and back again. What happens to subjectivities when bodies become implicated in vast systems of (re)mediation? Within this general framework, allow me to briefly sketch out each of the chapters.

Chapter 1 examines the central role of recorded sound—a crucial component of the Cultural Revolution media environment—in the CCP's efforts to build and consolidate the PRC as a modern socialist nation. Specifically, I focus on the dominant sound technologies of the loudspeaker and the record player and the ways in which these technologies worked to produce the nation as a sonic space of mass publicity and socialist modernity. This sonic topography suggests a desire to sonically territorialize the nation and

purportedly civilize the minority peoples of the frontier. It is precisely at the figurative and literal margins of the socialist enterprise—in representational spaces of developmental backwardness—that we see the extent to which the modern national subject was still imagined as a consumer of both media and socialist commodities.

I build on this argument in chapter 2 with an analysis of the paradoxical figure of the socialist retailer, for whom making revolution meant selling commodities in the name of the Communist Party. The socialist department store was as much a site of class struggle as it was a place of consumption in the Cultural Revolution; indeed, these were often described as the same thing. As media and commodity consumption on the frontier became a paradigmatic mark of the modern socialist nation, the traveling broadcaster and the traveling salesperson—who brought the store counter to the people—were called on to enact, occupy, and patrol the same marginal, so-called underdeveloped spaces. In fact, the latter figure was so vital to the construction of a socialist modernity in the mid-1970s that the mobile retailer became the focus of many cultural products, including the nationally promoted northern *pingju* opera *Xiangyang Store* (*Xiangyang shangdian*). The role of the idealized salesperson as depicted in these works is critical to the function of the retail system as a whole. The vast array of customer service she provides is meant to mediate a fundamental contradiction of socialist economics: On the one hand, she casts consumer desire as not only politically acceptable but also emancipatory; while, on the other hand, she educates the masses (her prospective customers) about the dangers of frivolity, overindulgence, and the beguiling nature of commodities.

In chapter 3, I discuss the politics of productivist commodity display. Demonstrations of consumer plenty, as found in shopwindows, were meant to glorify production rather than fetishize consumption, but this was much easier said than done. Department stores, for one, inherited the architectural legacy of republican shopping, and the commodity on display remained exceedingly valuable as a representational form, quite apart from issues of a given commodity's actual use value. Moreover, the legibility of certain kinds of labor as production was not itself a given. I turn to the making of decorative porcelain in Jingdezhen, China's porcelain capital, to examine the tensions between different regimes of value as they played out in the organization of labor and the realm of sculptural aesthetics. Despite porcelain's historically elitist associations and the figurine's ties to petit bourgeois interiors, porcelain statuettes representing revolutionary heroes were churned out in Jingdezhen throughout the Cultural Revolution. A rewriting of porcelain-making historiography, the creation of massive new factories, and the construction of porcelain producers as members of the proletariat helped rehabilitate porcelain

as a politically acceptable medium in the Mao period. At the same time, this process also worked to make production visible in ways that purportedly usurped the position previously held by consumption and consumer desire.

Chapter 4 follows this up by examining a number of pedagogical texts and efforts to popularize political economy as part of a massive production of discourse intended to unmask the inner workings of the commodity form and thereby diffuse its latent, counterrevolutionary potential as it was understood in the Cultural Revolution. 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. Jing Chi's 1975 *A Commodity's Tale* (*Shangpin zishu*) is a case in point. A Marxist history narrated in the first person by a commodity, the text is cast as the inside scoop on how commodities work and, therefore, as the ultimate weapon against their thrall. But in reality, *A Commodity's Tale* does little to imagine an alternative relationship between people and material things. After all, the narrator is less a specific material commodity than an abstracted dematerialized commodity form.

In chapter 5, I move to the world of amateur performance, which I approach as a crucial part of the Cultural Revolution media environment. Seen from this angle, the bodies of amateur actors become a medium much like vinyl or porcelain. The key to this reframing is a notion of performance as a technology of transformation, which acts on the plastic bodies and, ideally, the subjectivities of the masses to produce a nation of revolutionary heroes in the model of the porcelain figurines discussed in chapter 3. Playing a character in a yangbanxi, for example, thereby becomes a way to actually produce 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? In fact, the constant vigilance required to prevent such sabotage paradoxically guarantees that the transformation will never occur to specifications. In other words, a Cultural Revolution *hermeneutics of suspicion* necessarily begets this technology's failure.

Chapter 6 draws this study to a close with an examination of Cultural Revolution tabletop and wall-hanging mirrors in an effort to grapple with this central question: To what extent does the amateur performer's participation

in networks of Cultural Revolution mediation, as described in the previous chapter, implicate that performer in and expose her to the vicissitudes of the commodity economy? Mirrors, ornamented with images of socialist models and produced for the home in massive numbers, operated very much with the same goals and logic as performance during this period, and they therefore allow us to think through the mechanisms and consequences of media proliferation. Not unlike the amateur performer, as the gazer interacts with the mirror, her body is rendered as alienable and exchangeable as a commodity.

The Stakes

Taken together, these six chapters are intended to map key aspects of the Cultural Revolution media environment, to analyze its underlying problematics, and to articulate the ways in which these problematics hark back to, and engage with, the commodity form. As a group, they also attest to the fine line between restricting the scope of commodity production under the dictatorship of the proletariat and the proliferation of commodities in the name of teleological progress or modernization, not to mention the difficulty of policing that line since the beginning of the Chinese socialist enterprise. The political and economic predicament with which the CCP has so obviously struggled in its market dealings since the 1980s is by no means new. What may well be new, however, is that, the market having long since usurped the plan, the purported uniqueness of contemporary China's socialism/capitalism—its defining Chinese characteristics—now more often than not amounts to an alibi for the unexpected persistence of the CCP in the era of the market.⁴⁴ Daniel Vukovich has even suggested that the widely held belief that the People's Republic of China will inevitably become the same as “us,” that is, the (Anglo-American) West, constitutes a prevailing form of Orientalism in the twenty-first century.⁴⁵ To the extent that this is the case, the Communist Party is cast as developmentally out of step with the Chinese market and the sole obstacle to the fulfillment of the PRC's liberal destiny. When, to paraphrase Yiching Wu, “actually existing” socialism is understood as a mere “detour in the long history of capitalism,” an aberration to be overcome in this way, questions concerning the CCP's continuing hold on power and legitimacy present themselves as something of a puzzle: Having outlived the Leninist party-states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the continued survival of the CCP—well in excess of its life expectancy, if the basic assumption of economic liberalization and global precedent are to be believed—cries out for explanation.⁴⁶

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 benefit of "[keeping] the population satisfied when the previous certainties collapsed in the reform period. Communism and 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."⁴⁷ This argument has been all the more persuasive for jibing neatly with a widely held explanation for the 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."⁴⁸ Discontent led to collapse. Insofar as that discontent can 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, however. On the one hand, the purportedly free exchange of commodities is saddled with the responsibility of political liberalization, whereas, 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.⁴⁹ 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 1949.⁵⁰ Such "rhetorics of transition," predicated on a notion of market development, may well, as Kevin Latham suggests, "enable the Party to defer utopia, or the new range of utopias, into the future once again," thereby maintaining its legitimacy.⁵¹ But in reality, 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 a consumerist paradise.

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.”⁵² 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 the commodity form in the Cultural Revolution. The future utopia currently espoused by the CCP may well be littered with commodities, but we have yet to fully come to grips with the extent to which the socialist imaginary of the Mao period—constructed in large part by and through processes of mediation—was bound up with them and their underlying logic as well. *Newborn Socialist Things* seeks to remedy that situation.