

BOOK REVIEW

Material Contradictions in Mao's China

Edited by Jennifer Altehenger and Denise Y. Ho. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022. 264 pp. \$105.00 (cloth), \$32.00 (paper)

Reviewed by Emily Graf 

University of Tübingen

Email: emily.graf@uni-tuebingen.de

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Material Contradictions in Mao's China is a history of material culture that focuses on the Mao era (1949–1976). It comprises ten chapters that tell the history of Mao's China, each using the lens of a specific object or material. The edited volume greatly enriches our understanding of PRC history by shifting our attention away from textual sources and oral histories to the stories objects and materials tell us about the times they shaped and about the people who handled them. By foregrounding materiality, these stories can fill in where written sources are scarce or difficult to access—and even where they are ample, objects are shown to complement, broaden, and at times challenge written and oral histories. The volume is elegantly framed with a clear and concise introduction by editors Jennifer Altehenger and Denise Y. Ho, which captures the reader's attention with a concrete, singular, tangible case (the division of a divorced couple's everyday household items), and an afterword by Jonathan Bach, which offers the reader an abstract and compellingly intangible theoretical framework that ties together common underlying concepts of material contradiction. While many readers might still dive into single chapters as case studies, this framing succeeds in making this edited volume read very much like a book that is best read cover to cover.

The contributors reveal the ways in which objects and materials developed powers, at times even gaining an agency beyond human design and control. The editors acknowledge from the outset that in today's scholarship the time in which Mao's vision of socialism was implemented in China's socialist experiment is “rightly framed as a time of scarcity” (Introduction, p. 2), but precisely because objects were rare and out of reach did people attribute great meaning to things. According to Marxist theory, communism haunted bourgeois society, but socialism, a theory now put into practice, in turn “had its own problem with ghosts” (Afterword, p. 219) for it co-existed on a global stage with capitalist material culture. Socialism wrestled with or was haunted by the remnants of material desire and commodity fetishism.

In socialist China, bamboo (discussed by Jennifer Altehenger) and brick (discussed by Cole Roskam) were much more than building materials; they became modest and resilient “model” materials and a “modern” “socialist” alternative to steel, concrete, or glass. But contributors also reveal that the powers of objects and materiality were limited: for example, when trucks produced during the Third-Front industrialization rush in a rural factory in Hebei did not materialize on time, nor in the desired quality

and quantity, and the trucks made increasingly harsh material demands on the factory workers who produced them (Covell F. Meyskens). Limitations of the powers of materiality further became increasingly apparent in the material discrepancies created by the “mandatory, unequal exchange between urban and rural material sectors” (p. 195); rapid industrialization was possible only by extracting the surpluses from the vast agrarian and light-industrial rural China, where millions of people rarely touched money or industrial commodities, and funneling them into the small urban industrial sectors (Jacob Eyferth).

But the powers of objects again manifested themselves in the cultural realm, where design, theatre, and film were shaped by the materiality of historical patterns (analyzed by Christine I. Ho), by the tangibility of dance props (analyzed by Emily Wilcox) and by the high- and low-tech equipment carried across the countryside by mobile cinema teams (analyzed by Jie Li). And when it comes to the very basic necessity of food, three chapters shed light on different periods of the Mao era. First, the increasing state control over Beijing restaurants during the 1950s affected the material ingredients of food (be it duck meat or pickles) and led to a decline in quality and a loss of pride or identity connected to flavors (Madeleine Yue Dong). While Dong focuses on the hindered mobility of objects (e.g., the impeded delivery of lamb meat from the countryside to the capital), another contribution highlights their mobility: objects moved across the ideological border of socialism vs. capitalism in the material form of small postal packets that were sent into the PRC from British Hong Kong and Macau during the years of famine (1959–62) and in the early years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–70), providing relief but at times also burdening their recipients (Denise Y. Ho) by presenting a tempting and thereby threatening intrusion from without. And finally, film productions during the late Cultural Revolution can also be situated between burden and relief, visualizing fully stocked supermarket shelves and abundant food, and thereby risking visual proximity to images of capitalist excess and threatening narratives of self-restraint from within (Laurence Coderre).

Material Contradictions in Mao's China corroborates recent studies that foreground the materiality of culture where it often appears intangible, such as in literature or audio recordings, by including the more visual realms of film, dance, and design. But the chapters have a stronger economic focus on production, placing cultural objects in the context of foodstuffs, building materials, and automobiles, thus ever so slightly shifting the semantics of their political nature towards historical materialism. The contributors convincingly use material culture and materiality to show how people, from a high-ranking cadre enjoying a luxury meal in the capital to a bricklayer laying brick, each in their own way, were at a specific moment in the Mao period “do(ing) things [not with words but] with *things* in Chinese politics” (Introduction, p.3, emphasis original). In this regard, the story is largely a political history. While it puts the objects center stage, it ultimately enquires into the human relationships in the background, and how people negotiated the value, use, and meanings of objects. The contributors fully exploit archival sources, subtly incorporate an impressive array of interview materials, and unearth a great breadth of material sources. The volume does not aim to evaluate whether China and its material culture was socialist or not (Introduction, p.7), but instead succeeds in greatly contributing to our understanding of “socialism as part of everyday lived experience” (p. 8), contradictory as socialism may be in theory and certainly was in practice.

Objects become a valuable resource and tool in the hands of these historians and cultural studies scholars. Objects serve as a barometer (Denise Y. Ho, p. 137); as a

means to break through rigid periodization of “campaign time” (Introduction, p. 4); or as material outcomes of blueprints that allow us retrace their implied “makers,” thus blurring a segregation between ignorance and knowledge and transcending hierarchies of expert or beginner, layman or artisan (Altehenger, p. 31). In hindsight, objects may even come to embody ideological concepts and their uncanny doubles or specters. This may be the brick as “the model” material that eventually makes demands on the model bricklayer curbing his agency (Roskam, p. 47). Or it may be cinematic power generators that come to make demands on their carriers, turning them into cyborgs in order to reach into rural spaces, merging bodies with objects creating prosthetic extensions (Li, p. 119). In other cases, objects and their meanings make demands of (self-)sacrifice on those who handle them (e.g., both the recipients and senders of food parcels; Denise Y. Ho, p. 133), but *especially* on those to whom the greatest promises of plenty were made in the first place. The demands that objects made left little agency to the actual human self who was making the sacrifice (in contrast to the “model self” internally propelled towards self-sacrifice). Through the existence of such doubles (Afterword, p. 220), people could understand objects as “socialist” rather than as capitalist products or fetishized objects (p. 220). The objects acquired an agency no one person ever fully granted them, be it Chairman or rural factory worker.

The contributors of the volume use a terminology that steers clear of normativity, eschewing value judgements by using the concepts of scarcity and plenty, laborers and experts, regulated austerity and self-sacrifice. The chapters present the specters of socialism and capitalism haunting each other; it often remains unclear “who is haunting whom” (Afterword, Bach, p. 220). In the insightful moments in which objects and materiality resist human design and instrumentalization or resist taking sides in a (cold) war the contributors truly go beyond complementing and indeed rewrite the history of the Mao era.