

## Material Culture in Mao's China

### Abstracts

#### **Panel 1: Fabrication**

\* Jennifer Altehenger, King's College London

*Bamboo: Working with an (Extra)ordinary Material*

Timber, metal, steel, cotton, plastics, bamboo, and rattan are some of the materials that made Mao's China and shaped how people experienced life under CCP rule. None of these materials were new when the CCP came to national power in 1949. In each case, the young regime not only had to appropriate the material resources and knowledge about the material, it also sought to influence how people thought about each material; in relation to themselves, their position in society, and the national goal of industrialisation and societal progress. Bamboo occupied a special position in this material universe: it was local to China, ubiquitous, affordable, versatile, and therefore in the eyes of the party-state particularly well suited to the political demands of a new, liberated, and industrializing China and its masses. Because it was such an ordinary material it had the potential to facilitate the extraordinary on the road to socialism. Compared to other materials such as timber or steel, however, bamboo has not featured as prominently in historiography of the Mao Era. This paper examines the CCP's different attempts to make bamboo part of the socialist promise, from the promotion of model artisans to the dissemination and popularization of knowledge about growing and working with bamboo.

\* Sun Peidong, Fudan University

*Really Cool, Really Beautiful: The "Dacron Mania" in China from the 1960s-1980s*

To explore the “dacron mania” in Mao’s China, I would ask four sub-questions as below. 1) What was the position of Chinese Dacron science in world system? 2) Who had access to Dacron consumption? 3) How was the fabrication of Dacron in Mao’ China? 4) And how did the China’s command economy cope with state consumerism? Based on archival materials, newspapers, and personal accounts, this research aims to offer a new perspective to better understand the experiences and values of Chinese Consumers on Dacron, the norms of socialist consumption and the catch-up and overtake narratives at an early stage in the process of the Chinese industrialization.

#### **Panel 2: Building**

\* Cole Roskam, Hong Kong University

*The Brick*

The brick was an indispensable contributor to the construction of Mao-era China. Although the privileging of steel and concrete production as part of the state’s promotion of large-scale, heavy industrial development has ensured the central position of these materials in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) history, the brick was active in aiding the materialization of an everyday socialist modernity in China.

In considering the brick’s multivalence to the construction of socialism in China, this paper pays particular attention to its operational and representational agency—its ability to perform a fundamental material and structural service while simultaneously embodying new environments realized through the localized work and production processes considered essential to the Party’s *raison d’être*.

\* Covell Meyskens, Naval Postgraduate School

*Maoist Man and its Discontents in the Third Front Town of Panzhihua*

This paper examines CCP efforts to construct a new Maoist Man in the steel town of Panzhihua which was built in the late 1960s as part of the Third Front campaign to industrialize the interior in order to prepare China for war with the United States or Soviet Union. The paper shows that some people experienced the Third Front campaign in ways that did not fit with Maoist expectations. Some officials from big cities wanted to keep resources for themselves and not send them to inland regions. Third Front recruits could also see spatial divides in China's economic geography, and they knew in what places they would rather be. When urbanites received a transfer order, many became depressed and anxious about their own and family's future. After arriving in Panzhihua, many still did not think of socialism first and family as a distant second. They exerted themselves at work and made extra efforts to ensure that their children had a better life than their own. Rural folk, on the other hand, desired access to the version of socialist modernity that Third Front work-units made available to their employees in the form of special schools, hospitals, residential areas, and cultural activities.

Other people's sense of self-worth aligned more closely with Maoist principles. The underdeveloped state of the interior motivated people to work hard, and laborers valued receiving ideological praise for helping to build socialist China. Some party members also perceived the Third Front to be the next logical step in their life trajectory. Their own personal biography was already deeply interconnected with constructing socialism in China, and so it made sense that the next phase of Chinese history would demand undergoing further hardships to ensure that socialist China could industrially protect itself from the dangers of the global Cold War. Yet even some of the most ardent Maoists complained that life in Panzhihua was boring, because there was little to do but work.

### **Panel 3: Production and Consumption**

\* Madeleine Yue Dong, University of Washington

*Nationalizing the Food Industry in Beijing, 1949-1956*

Madeleine Dong examines the impact of the nationalization of private industry and commerce on the material life of Beijing in the early 1950s, focusing on Liubiju, a nationally known pickled vegetable store, as a case study. She argues that the state monopolization of purchasing and marketing and the eventual nationalization fundamentally transformed the businesses in Beijing. The quality of Liubiju products declined when new problems emerged in material supply, pricing, management, and wage structure after the nationalization. The nationalization, thus, marked the ending of much of Beijing's traditional material culture.

\* Jakob Eyferth, University of Chicago

*Beyond the Maoist Commodity: Material Life in Rural China, 1950-1980*

What we think of as the material culture of Maoist China – the Red Guard suit and the Mao badge, the *danwei* housing compound and the ration card – is the material culture of urban China. The Maoist state used mass-produced commodities to insert revolutionary messages into people's everyday life. Yet large segments of the Chinese population consumed few commodities, and remained ignorant of the "new things of socialism." In rural China (with the exception perhaps of wealthy villages near major cities), most people ate food they grew themselves; built their houses from local stones, mud, and timber; burned local straw and fuelwood to heat their dwellings; made what little furniture and farm implements they had from scratch; and continued to wear homespun cloth, made manually from locally grown cotton. Enamel wash basins and tea cups, rubber shoes and boots,

propaganda posters, and thermos bottles made sum inroads, but other commodities – even such everyday items as sugar, tea, cigarettes, soap, and detergent – did not become widespread until after Mao's death. The simple fact that yearly cash income (excluding private sidelines) was in the range of 15 *yuan* per capita ensured that most rural people consumed few industrially produced goods. This paper examines the implications of this bifurcation in material culture. If socialism was, among other things, a material regime, what did it mean not to partake in the new world of goods?

\* Karl Gerth, University of California, San Diego

*Three Big Reproducers of "Bourgeois" Consumerism in the Mao Era*

Why has consumerism become predominant in the modern world? This paper makes two related arguments. First, consumerism is embedded in industrialization. Second, consumerism has not spread spontaneously. The example of China suggests how industrializing states, whether “capitalist” or “socialist,” have played a critical role in spreading the defining value of consumerism: you are what you consume. This paper examines the spread of consumerism even during the avowedly anti-consumerist, egalitarian “socialist” Mao era (1949-76) through the history of the three most highly sought-after industrial products: a wristwatch, a bicycle, and a sewing machine.

Industrialization needed people (now re-conceptualized as “consumers”) to want newer and more products. Industrialization and consumerism have depended on and spread through each other. Observers often overlook this dependence to focus on the production side of this relationship: how people used new technologies and fossil fuels to improve productivity and expand production, that is, industrialize. Studying consumerism shifts the focus from production to consumption, from the supply side to the demand side of industrialization. The history of consumerism explores the challenge of getting people to value learning about and attempting to acquire ever-more mass-produced things.

This paper discusses the compulsion experienced by people and leaders in the Mao era to adopt the values of consumerism and compete through consumption. As an inherent part of industrialization, this compulsion permeated the PRC even at the height of Mao and the CCP's efforts to create an alternative “socialist” culture and economic organization. Despite the socialist rhetoric and handful of socialistic policies attempting to do otherwise, state-led industrialization under the CCP not only failed to destroy consumerism but rather helped spread it into new classes and places.

#### **Panel 4: Circulation and Utility**

\* Weilin Pan, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences

*Dialectics of Waste: Mobilizing the Masses for Waste Recovery and Recycling in Socialist China, 1952-1972*

The recycling of used everyday goods and municipal refuse has a long history in China. Pawn shops, thrift shops, vendor/collectors and rag-pickers, in cities, towns and villages, contributed to the formation of lively regional and local markets for various used goods and scrap materials, supplying for and connecting people and places at different levels of the nation's economy and material life.

After 1949, the CCP central government tried to continuously strengthen the supervision over this business while encourage the people to make active use of this kind of trade channel to maintain manufacturing productivity especially when the Chinese industry faced serious material constraints in the 1950s. Used stuff and business of used stuff that survived the regime transition of 1949 had to be liquated, restricted, clamped down or transformed so as to bring them in alignment with the ideology of a new Socialist society. The overarching national campaign ‘Increase Production and Practise Economy’ (增產節用) put the business of waste recovery and recycling at the central place of the national economy like never before.

This paper will discuss how the national system of China’s waste recovery and recycling, headed by the National Supply and Marketing Cooperative, took shape through the mass movements during the heydays of the economic leap forward and the Cultural Revolution. Waste recovery and recycling gained political weight after Mao’s idea of “comprehensive usage” had become the guiding ideology of China’s rapid industrialization. It was not only a matter of production and productivity, but also a matter of dialectical materialism. The usable and the useless are a unity of opposites. The use value can be unceasingly resurrected as long as human endeavor implies. The idea and practice of waste recovery and recycling in the Mao era showcased the revolutionary romanticism of the relationship between people and state, as well as people and nature. As Mao himself declared just before the Agricultural Cooperative Movement culminated, Socialism has the power to transform the people, and the people has the power to transform the materials with creativity well beyond our imagination.

\* Denise Ho, Yale University

*Cross-Border Objects: Goods, Packages, and Material Culture as Politics*

Beyond consumer goods produced in China, the material culture of the Mao era included goods from outside of China, whether imported from socialist friends or carried/smuggled/sent across its borders. This paper considers objects that crossed boundaries, particularly the border between Hong Kong and China. Based on preliminary work in archives, newspapers, and oral history collections, it examines two categories of cross-border objects: those carried by travellers and those sent as so-called “small packets.” The Chinese state itself represented material culture in conflicting ways; on the one hand, it used material prosperity as political legitimacy both within and without, while on the other hand, it condemned capitalist consumer lifestyles and promoted socialist austerity. For their own part, overseas Chinese used material culture to assess life in “new China” and carried/sent goods across borders, creating their own counternarrative.

## **Panel 5: Invention and Reinvention**

\* Christine Ho, University of Massachusetts-Amherst

*Alternate Modernisms, Objecthood, and the Problem of Decoration (Zhuangshi) Magazine*

How was the realm of the senses in New China imagined by designers and craft historians? This essay argues that the short-lived Decoration magazine sought to define an alternate modernism for socialist culture by engaging histories of material culture. Designed for widespread distribution as a compendium of inspiration for designers nationwide, Decoration was spearheaded by a network of figures heading the major craft and design departments, spearheaded by the designer Zhang Guangyu with contributions from material culture researchers such as Shen Congwen and Pang Xunqin. With pictorial techniques derived from the legacy of Shanghai

publishing, Decoration deemphasizes textual narration in favor of stylistic parallels in everyday objects, explanations of iconography derived from archaeological artifacts, and folk art across the world. Decoration rejects what its creators saw as a myopic emphasis upon the elite fine arts in favor of a sensory investment in the richness of material culture, deployed to create the surfaces of a new socialist environment.

\* Laurence Coderre, New York University

*Too Much of a Good Thing? Productivist Plenty and the Remaking of the Commodity Fetish*

Can goods stretching to the ceiling; enamel basins overtaking a wall; fresh eggs flooding a counter. This paper examines practices of commodity display in department stores and related commercial venues as depicted in pictorial magazines and trade publications from the late Mao period. Meant to signal the material benefits of contemporary PRC citizenship and the eventual abundance of communism, such displays come uncomfortably close to capitalist spectacles of consumerist excess. How is a self-professed “socialist” retail system to distinguish its shop windows, for example, from those of pre-revolutionary Shanghai or New York’s Macy’s? It must recast these very public shows of plenty in productivist, rather than consumerist, terms. It must essentially attempt to turn display—and desire—inside out.

#### **Panel 6: Performance and the Body**

\* Emily Wilcox, The University of Michigan

*The Dancer's Body as a Form of Socialist Materiality*

Dance was an important component of the performing arts in Mao’s China, with participants ranging from conservatory-trained professionals to folk artists and amateur hobbyists. While many dance forms around the world center the human body as an independent performing entity, in Mao’s China the dancing subject more often comprised assemblages that combined the human performer with performing physical objects. Thus, one of the most distinctive features of dance in Mao’s China was the use of stage props. Dancers in Mao’s China performed highly skilled choreographies involving a wide range of props—colored silk streamers, tassel-ornamented metal swords, silk and paper folding fans, painted parasols, animal puppets in the shapes of dragons, lions, fish, birds, and butterflies, flower-shaped lanterns, and drums in a variety of shapes and sizes. This use of props in Mao-era dance constituted the dancer’s body as a form of socialist materiality in two respects: first, it allowed rural culture to find a place in urban stage performance after the 1949 shift of the Chinese Communist Party from its rural base areas back to cities; second, it presented an image of the human as not an independent universal individual but as a social subject embedded in a specific environment.

\* Jie Li, Harvard University

*Cinema at the Grassroots: Film Exhibition and Reception in Mao's China*

Whereas most Chinese cinema scholarship focuses on film texts and production histories, the book project on which this paper draws will examine movie theatres and open-air screenings, mobile projectionists and audiences, as well as memories of revolutionary and foreign films. Its six chapters are structured around three sets of questions: *Where* were the movies in China? *Who* showed and watched movies? *What* did audiences see and remember from the films? Its answer to the famous question “What is Cinema” is “a physical and spirit medium,” an answer going beyond the aesthetic and philosophical to the material and spatial, bodily and social aspects of cinema. Whereas most existing studies consider cinema

as a manifestation of urban modernity, “cinema at the grassroots” refers to the movie screening sites in villages, townships, and counties as well as urban factories and neighborhoods, and moviegoing as a part of people’s everyday lives. Drawing on local archives, oral histories and ethnographic fieldwork, this book project will also feature a “grassroots approach” to cinema as an everyday space and practice.

After an overview of the book project, this paper will focus on the bodily mediation of cinema through mobile projectionists. Instead of generations of filmmakers, I propose rewriting Chinese film history from the bottom up by tracking its “generations” of projectionists, with pre-1949 exhibitors as the “first generation,” state employees of the “Seventeen Years” as the “second generation,” and “barefoot projectionists” of the 1970s as the “third generation.” Given the themes of this conference and panel, I give special attention to the ways human bodies wove together a revolutionary media network in the face of material shortage and infrastructural underdevelopment, as well as material and bodily practices of “rustic cinema” such as lantern slideshows and live dubbing. Arguing that the communist revolution was also a “media revolution,” this paper develops the concept of “cinematic guerrillas” to highlight mobile, bodily, improvisational, and grassroots practices as well as some unintended effects of socialist propaganda.