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A Necessary Evil: Conceptualizing the Socialist Commodity under Mao

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At the moment, our country employs a commodity system, and the wage system is unequal as well, what with the eight-grade wage system, etc. Such things can only be restricted under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

—Mao Zedong[1]

It seems fitting to begin this article as did so many texts during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), with a quotation from Chairman Mao (1893–1976). The public revelation of a new "important directive" (*zhongyao zhishi*) such as this was typically accompanied with much fanfare, in part because of the quasi-sacred status of its source and in part because it was an important indicator of which way the political winds were blowing at that given moment. First published on the front page of *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily) on 22 February 1975 and later reprinted in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) theoretical organ, *Hongqi* (Red flag),[2] the above quotation was part of an exhortation to study theory (*lilun*), including and especially the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat (*wuchanjieji zhuanzheng*).[3]

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[1] My translation. "Makesi, Engesi, Liening lun wuchanjieji zhuanzheng" [Marx, Engels, and Lenin on the Dictatorship of the Proletariat]. *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily], 22 Feb. 1975: 1–4. For a slightly different translation of this quotation and its original context, see *Peking Review* 18, 9 (1975): 5–12.

[2] "Makesi, Engesi, Liening lun wuchanjieji zhuanzheng" [Marx, Engels, and Lenin on the dictatorship of the proletariat], *Hongqi* [Red flag] 3 (1975): 3–19.

[3] Although it did not make reference to this new directive, the effort to study the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat appears to have been initiated some weeks earlier with an essay attributed to "Chi Heng," a well-known penname used by the editorial group of *Hongqi*. See Chi Heng, "Renzhen xuexi wuchanjieji zhuanzheng de lilun" [Conscientiously study the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat], *Renmin ribao* [People's daily], 2 Feb. 1975: 1, 4; translated in *Peking*

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In actuality, Mao's statement dated back to a conversation he had on his eighty-first birthday, 26 December 1974, with Premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) in Changsha, Hunan.[4] Written up and distributed amongst high Party officials in early January, with Mao's approval of course, these comments and the general push to study the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat in which they participated featured prominently in the political back and forth of 1975.

To paraphrase Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, 1975 was largely Deng Xiaoping's year.[5] In the first weeks of January, Deng (1904–1997) was officially appointed Chief of Staff of the People's Liberation Army, Vice Chairman of the Military Affairs Commission, Vice Chairman of the CCP, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, and First Vice-Premier of the State Council. Although his star had clearly been on the rise since the fall of 1974, when Mao telegraphed many of these appointments, Deng was now in a position to pursue a policy of "consolidation" (*zhengdun*),[6] which in May 1975 gained additional steam under the banner of "taking the three directives as the key link" (*yi san xiang zhishi wei gang*). Mao's statement on the importance of theory, which included the excerpt above, was identified as the first of these purportedly key directives, the others emphasizing Party stability and unity and economic development. The first directive's focus on the dictatorship of the proletariat and the revisionist threat was in some ways out of step with Deng's consolidation priority, however, which seemed to be economic growth. Indeed, the push to study theory was initially the purview of the much more radical wing of the Party—Mao's third wife, Jiang Qing (1914–1991), and her allies—against which Deng Xiaoping was implicitly opposed. In his original conversation with Zhou Enlai, for example, Mao had indicated that Yao Wenyuan (1931–2005) and Zhang Chunqiao (1917–2005)—both members, along with Jiang Qing, of the infamous "Gang of Four"—should not only collect Lenin quotations on the dictatorship of the proletariat, but also formulate essays of their own on the topic.[7] They did so,

Review 18, 7 (1975): 6–10. A week later, another editorial, this time in *Renmin ribao*, did refer to some of Mao's recent pronouncements, although not the one I have included here. See "Xue hao wuchanjieji zhuanzheng de lilun" [Study well the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat]. *Renmin ribao* [People's daily], 9 Feb. 1975: 1; translated in *Peking Review* 18, 7 (1975): 4–5.

[4] Mao had also raised these issues with Danish Prime Minister Poul Hartling (1914–2000) in their meeting of 20 October 1974. In Zhou Enlai's account of the 26 December conversation, Mao makes explicit reference to these earlier remarks. Mao Zedong, *Jian guo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* [Post-1949 manuscripts of Mao Zedong], vol. 13 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1998), 413–16.

[5] Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 379.

[6] This is Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun's rendering of the term, in *The End of the Maoist Era: Chinese Politics during the Twilight of the Cultural Revolution, 1972–1976* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[7] Mao, *Jian guo yilai*, 413.

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publishing their disquisitions in *Hongqi*, of which Yao was then editor, in March and April 1975, respectively.[8]

All of this is to say that Mao's December 1974 comments on the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, its economic implications, and its role in staving off capitalist restoration became both a rhetorical touchstone as well as something of a factional, political weapon throughout much of 1975.[9] But as Alessandro Russo has pointed out, this orthodox understanding of the discursive function of Mao's words does little to address "the theoretical-political content" of the issues Mao was actually speaking to, nor does it allow us to think of the questions Mao raised as actual questions with more than one possible answer.[10] For Russo, this constitutes more than a missed opportunity to grapple with these issues for their own sake. Rather, it belies a fundamental misinterpretation of the historical record, since "the publication of Mao's [aforementioned] theses in February 1975 was an effort to reconsider unsolved theoretical knots, and not a campaign for popularizing an established doctrine."[11] Airing out such thorny questions as, say, the appropriate place and use of the commodity-form under socialism was potentially much more disruptive to the social fabric than a run-of-the-mill popularization campaign would indicate.

Even so, for us looking back across decades of staggering Chinese marketization, so often couched as a radical departure from the past, it is striking how much of Mao's assessment is *not* up for debate: "At the moment, our country employs a commodity system." Even under the dictatorship of the proletariat, Mao categorically declares that China has and will continue to have a commodity economy. This fact is not in question, here. The declaration itself, though very much in keeping with a long-held tenet of Chinese socialist political economy, has tremendous theoretical implications. Marx famously begins *Capital*, his comprehensive treatment of the capitalist system, with an analysis of its most fundamental component: the commodity-form. But what is one to do with the notion of *socialist* commodities, of a commodity-form that, in effect, outlives capitalism? As I sketch out in this study, the answers Chinese leaders and political economists provided to this question varied widely during the socialist period. Theorists differed as to the reason for the commodity-form's continued existence, its relative necessity and appropriateness, the amount of

[8] Yao Wenyuan, "Lun Lin Biao fan dang jituan de shehui jichu" [On the social basis of the Lin Biao anti-party clique], *Hongqi* 3 (1975): 20–29; translated in *Peking Review* 18, 10 (1975): 5–10; and Zhang Chunqiao, "Lun dui zichanjieji de quanmian zhuanzheng" [On exercising all-round dictatorship over the bourgeoisie], *Hongqi* 4 (1975): 3–12; translated in *Peking Review* 18, 14 (1975): 5–11.

[9] This view is upheld even in recent, more nuanced scholarship on the topic, including Teiwes and Sun, *End of the Maoist Era*.

[10] Alessandro Russo, "How Did the Cultural Revolution End? The Last Dispute between Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, 1975," *Modern China* 39, 3 (2013): 239–79, 240.

[11] Ibid., 245.

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danger it posed to the forward march toward communism, and the policies required to contain whatever danger that might be. Mao's matter-of-fact statement that commodities could and did indeed exist in the PRC in fact masks a paradox with a rich, transnational, and at-times contentious history, as we shall see.

As I have said, Mao's comments on the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, initially at least, seemed to bolster the position of what came to be known as the Gang of Four: Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen (1935–1992). As it happens, these were precisely the figures most closely associated with the dominant position in Cultural Revolution-period political economy—the so-called "Shanghai School"[12]—and its take on commodity production: namely, that one found in the commodity-form a soil rich for the development of revisionism. According to this view, as long as there were commodities, capitalism and the bourgeoisie would always threaten to reappear. And yet, one could not rid oneself of commodities altogether; a commodity-free society was the promise of a future communism, not the reality of contemporary socialism. Commodities were a holdover from pre-Liberation, capitalist society, a necessary evil during the long socialist transition. The order of the day, then—even for the most "radical" faction of the CCP during the Cultural Revolution—was not the elimination of commodities, but rather their appropriate limitation. In short, the risk they posed needed to be properly managed, that is to say, with a weather eye on the communist horizon.

I therefore contend that long before the torturous birth of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi*) in the 1980s, or Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour (*nan xun*) in 1992, the CCP has had a fraught relationship with the commodity and its consumption. It turns out that the balance between restricting commodity production under the dictatorship of the proletariat and promoting commodity consumption in the name of teleological progress and/or "modernization" has always been elusive, although that does not seem to have stopped theorists of various stripes from wrestling with the problem or, more fundamentally, from engaging the riddle of the commodity under socialism. My particular goal here is to situate this article's epigraph, Mao's last significant foray into this political economic quagmire, both within a very particular intellectual lineage—via Stalin and the Soviets—and the CCP's history of mobilizing mass theoretical study in this area. Much of the scholarship I will draw upon in order to do this tackles only one of these areas at the expense of the other, focusing on either theory or mass politics. Maoist political economy was the subject of considerable attention in the late 1970s and early 1980s, both in American and Australian academic circles,

[12] Peer Moller Christensen and Jorgen Delman, "A Theory of Transitional Society: Mao Zedong and the Shanghai School," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 13, 2 (1981): 2–15, 7.

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but few were drawn to the question of how political economic theory as such might be deployed and/or reimagined as a revolutionary tool to mobilize the masses.[13] By contrast, it is the combination of these issues that interests me in this essay.

A WORD ON SOCIALIST ECONOMICS

When faced with the threat posed by the commodity (or other incipient capitalist elements) to the socialist project, CCP leaders had no choice but to engage with the field of socialist economics in pursuit of an explanation and response. To the extent that the PRC as a whole was ultimately called upon in the 1970s to manage this clear and present danger as best it could, only part of this process relied on the institutions of the planned economy and official commodity distribution networks.[14] The process was also greatly reliant on the political economic education of policymakers as well as the vigilance of the broad masses. As the average commodity consumer, for example, was called upon to keep her guard up, even as she enjoyed the rather scant material benefits of PRC citizenship, it was the study of political economy that was meant to actually facilitate this new form of clear-eyed consumption. In this sense, while the key political economic texts of the Cultural Revolution, and the Mao period more broadly, often grapple with difficult, abstract concepts and rely heavily on technical jargon, they are not "academic" in the usual (no doubt "bourgeois") sense. They were not divorced from the major mass mobilization campaigns of the Mao era; on the contrary, they were crucial to them.

Indeed, economics as a field of inquiry operated in a mode quite distinct from that with which we are familiar in the contemporary academe. Cyril Lin identifies two branches of Mao-period economics: the diagnostic and the functional.[15] The latter involves the mathematical and bureaucratic nitty-gritty of making the planned economy work, including pricing mechanisms and accounting practices. The former, on the other hand, involves every aspect of (political) life. Diagnostic economics,

[13] Many of the American scholars cited herein—Carl Riskin, Mark Selden, Richard Levy, Moss Roberts—appear in Fabio Lanza's recent look at Asian Studies in the United States in the context of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. See *The End of Concern: Maoist China, Activism, and Asian Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). Also featured prominently are a significant cluster of Australian scholars and their writings, including Bill Brugger, Steve Reglar, Graham Young, and Dennis Woodward.

[14] As Carl Riskin notes, these institutional mechanisms had been hollowed out by this time. See "Neither Plan nor Market: Mao's Political Economy," in William A. Joseph, Christine P. W. Wong, and David Zweig, eds., *New Perspectives on the Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies and Harvard University, 1991), 133–52.

[15] This distinction is taken from Francis Seton's work on the Soviet system. See "The Question of Ideological Obstacles to Rational Price Setting in Communist Countries," in Alan Abouchar, ed., *The Socialist Price Mechanism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1977), 10–39.

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comprise highly abstract and somewhat philosophical investigations into the existence, under specific conditions of Chinese socialism, of various economic categories (commodity, money, price) and "laws" posited and used by Marx to explain the inner structure and workings of pre-socialist economic formations in general and of capitalist commodity production in particular. […] Such diagnoses in socialist countries are indispensable in gauging the direction and distance travelled away from capitalism and towards full communism; the nature of the economy charted by these periodic sightings then defines the type of policies, mechanisms and production relations ideologically consistent with the socialist odyssey.[16]

In other words, the diagnostic trumped the functional, in a manner that might retrospectively be deemed "unscientific."[17] Lin himself speaks of "the reinstatement of economics in China" after 1978 as the return to prominence of functional, empirical considerations, as though diagnostic economics did not really constitute "economics" at all.

Be that as it may, it is clear that the individuals providing diagnoses of the socialist system, including and especially Mao, characterized what they were doing as "political economy" (*zhengzhi jingjixue*), a term I deploy in a similar fashion here. More to the point, the problem presented by the commodity was regularly and explicitly discussed, often with considerable handwringing. That the field of Chinese Studies has, in recent decades, largely been blind to the importance of the commodity-form's central conceptual role in the PRC prior to the Reform Era says more about us, it seems to me, than it does about socialist economics' supposed lack of rigor. To that end, I have no interest in claiming the commodity-form as an ahistorical category of economic analysis, equally applicable to the Cultural Revolution as it is to the early twenty-first century. In fact, economic activity per se, including "actual" modes of exchange, is not my object of study.[18] Instead, I seek to understand the conceptual power and complexity of "the commodity" as an analytical category that persisted and continued to be invoked in the context of revolutionary mass politics.

MARX, STALIN, AND THE ORTHODOX POSITION

Given the PRC's ideological inclinations, it should come as no great surprise that it was Marx's treatment of the commodity-form and its function under capitalism, as articulated in *Capital*, which served as the conceptual foundation for

[16] Cyril Chihren Lin, "The Reinstatement of Economics in China Today," *China Quarterly* 85 (1981): 1–48, 6.

[17] It may even, on occasion, be deemed un-Marxian, as in Steve Reglar's critique of Mao, "Mao Zedong as a Marxist Political Economist: A Critique," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 17, 2 (1987): 208–33.

[18] This is in marked contrast to the work of anthropologist Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, for example. See "The Gift Economy and State Power in China," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, 1 (1989): 25–54; and *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

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Chinese socialist political economy as it came into its own in the 1950s. Disagreements arose over the precise scope and continued necessity of commodities under socialism, many of which were rooted in particular political projects, including the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960) and the Cultural Revolution, as we shall see, but the quasi-sacred status of Marx's writings accounts for the overwhelming uniformity in approaches to defining the commodity-form as such. The 1974 *Zhengzhi jingjixue mingci jieshi* (Explanation of terms in political economy), for example, includes an entry for "commodity" (*shangpin*) that essentially recapitulates *Capital*'s famous opening chapter. Commodities must be consumed by someone other than their producer and must be acquired through exchange. Moreover, that exchange is facilitated on the basis of the commodity-form's dual nature whereby use-value and exchange-value, as a function of labor-power measured in labor-time, are brought together. "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*)."[19] This much could be taken for granted; it was the prospect of transplanting commodities out of their "native" capitalist soil and into a more "advanced" stage of historical development that created problems, problems that became increasingly pressing as the business of socialist construction progressed. While Marx provided a clear definition of the commodity, he was frustratingly mum on this additional set of issues. For guidance in this area, Chinese political economists turned to the Soviet Union and, specifically, to Joseph Stalin's (1878–1953) latest writings on the subject, which remained authoritative in the PRC long after they had ceased to be so in the USSR.[20]

It is important to make a distinction here amongst the political economic positions taken by different Soviet leaders and thinkers. Consider the famously shifting economic policies of the 1920s—from the scarcities of war communism to the market reforms of the New Economic Policy to the centralization of the Five-Year Plan—and their evolving justifications.[21] Consider, too, the somewhat idiosyncratic theory of the thing as "co-worker" (as opposed to commodity) put forward by Boris Arvatov (1896–1940) and explored aesthetically by the Constructivists.[22] These early economic and artistic experiments do not seem to have had much of an impact on Chinese discussions after 1949. It was, rather, specifically Stalin's later theorizations that claimed the mantle of

[19] My translation; He Xu, ed. *Zhengzhi jingjixue mingci jieshi* [Explanation of terms in political economy] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1974), 46–47.

[20] Faced with this same silence on Marx's part themselves, the Bolsheviks appear to have turned to Germany and the work of Latvian economist Carl Ballod (Kārlis Balodis) (1864–1931). Leon Smolinski, "Planning without Theory 1917–1967," *Survey* 64 (1967): 108–28, 117–20.

[21] For a concise overview of these, see ibid.

[22] For the former, see Boris Arvatov, "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)," *October* 81 (1997): 119–28. For the latter, see Christina Kiaer, *Imagine no Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

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"Soviet" orthodoxy in the PRC. Among these, *Ėkonomicheskie problemy sot͡sializma v SSSR* (published in translation as "Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR"), was particularly influential in China throughout the Mao period, especially when it came to explaining the socialist economy's continued reliance on commodities.[23] The first of the work's four short pieces, "Remarks on the Economic Questions Connected with the November 1951 Discussion" (*Zamechaniia po ėkonomicheskim voprosam, svi͡azannym s noi͡abr'skoĭ diskussieĭ 1951 goda*) (hereafter "Remarks"),[24] made a deep and long-lasting impact throughout the communist world and was constantly invoked in Chinese economics.[25]

The broad influence of "Remarks" is in part attributable, I suspect, to its manageable length and categorical language. Stalin is unabashedly direct in expressing his opinions and criticism of others. Comprised of ten discussion points, this is political economy that is easily digestible, unequivocal in its statements, and, prior to 1956, ideologically unimpeachable by definition, given its source. But it is also the case that "Remarks" provided newly socialist countries in both Eastern Europe and Asia with an explanation as to why the 1950s Soviet economy operated the way it did and how, despite appearances, in some cases, these workings jibed with the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. For countries like China, in which the Communist Party was just beginning to grapple with the economic realities of socialist construction on a national scale,[26] the Soviet Union, which had "successfully" dealt with these

[23] Significantly, this text comprises Stalin's last economic pronouncements prior to his death; that is, it is an indication of where his thinking on economic questions ended up, not where it began. There does not seem to have been any interest on the part of Chinese economists in exploring his earlier writings.

[24] The eponymous discussion refers to a conference organized by the central Soviet government, attended by hundreds of economists, during which time a draft version of a socialist political economy textbook became a topic of debate. Publishing "Remarks," together with Stalin's scathing rebuke of diverging positions, in both the late-September 1952 issue (no. 18) of the journal *Bol'shevik* (Bolshevik) and as a stand-alone volume simultaneously, effectively put an end to the discussion, such as it was. For the latter, see Joseph Stalin, *Ėkonomicheskie problemy sot͡sializma v SSSR* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoĭ literatury, 1952). Hailed as a "great contribution to Marxist-Leninist theory," "Economic problems of socialism in the USSR" was also reprinted, in full, in *Pravda* on 3 and 4 October 1952, the eve of the XIX Party Congress. See "Velikiĭ vklad v teoriiu Marksizma-Leninizma," *Pravda*, 3 Oct. 1952: 1.

[25] Stalin's pronouncements were quickly translated into the languages of the various Communist states. The Chinese version, which appeared under the title *Sulian shehuizhuyi jingji wenti*, was released by People's Press (Renmin chubanshe) less than two months after the text's initial Russian publication, and the Chinese academic journal *Xuexi* (Study) also included the complete text in its November 1952 issue. See Joseph Stalin, *Sulian shehuizhuyi jingji wenti* [Economic problems of socialism in the USSR] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1952). Also in *Xuexi* 8 (1952): 3–27.

[26] The CCP did have experience dealing with economic issues in the base areas, however. Mao addressed some of these in 1942, as reproduced in *Jingji wenti yu caizheng wenti* [Economic and financial problems] (Subei xinhua shudian, 1949); available in English as *Mao Zedong and the Political Economy of the Border Region: A Translation of Mao's Economic and Financial Problems*, Andrew Watson, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). For an overview of the economic lessons learned from the base areas, see Mark Selden, "Mao Zedong and the

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problems since 1917, was essentially constitutive of what socialism was and, therefore, what the future for these other states would necessarily be. If the Soviet economy—with its five-year plans, centralized pricing system, nationalized heavy industry, and collectivized agriculture—amounted, in and of itself, to a roadmap for Chinese development in the early 1950s, "Remarks" worked to clarify that roadmap's theoretical underpinnings, all while justifying some of its idiosyncrasies, including the continued circulation of commodities.

It is the second of Stalin's ten points, "Commodity Production under Socialism" (*Vopros o tovarnom proizvodstve pri so͡tsializme*), that is of interest here. In it Stalin asserts that the Soviet economy fundamentally differed from that which had preceded it—there was now neither private ownership nor trafficking of workers' alienated labor—and this in turn impacted the nature of commodities in the USSR. "*[O]ur* commodity production is not of the ordinary type, but is a special kind of commodity production [*tovarnoe proizvodstvo osobogo roda*], commodity production without capitalists, which is concerned mainly with the goods of associated socialist producers (the state, the collective farms, the cooperatives), the sphere of action of which is confined to items of personal consumption, which obviously cannot possibly develop into capitalist production [*nikak ne mozhet razvit'sia͡ v kapitalisticheskoe proizvodstvo*], and which, together with its 'money economy,' is designed to serve the development and consolidation of socialist production."[27] Stalin draws a critical distinction between capitalism and a commodity economy; he conceives of a world in which commodity production takes place outside the purview of capitalists. "Commodity production must not be identified with capitalist production. They are two different things [*dve raznye veshchi*]. Capitalist production is the highest form of commodity production."[28] The commodity itself predated capitalism and could outlive it in an appropriately socialist way, given the structure of the new economy and its new social relations.[29]

Stalin goes further, however, in responding to advocates of the immediate elimination of commodities in the Soviet Union, by providing not only an

Political Economy of Chinese Development," in Arif Dirlik and Maurice Meisner, eds., *Marxism and the Chinese Experience: Issues in Contemporary Chinese Socialism* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1989), 43–58.

[27] Emphasis in the English translation. Joseph Stalin, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R.* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972), 16.

[28] Ibid., 13.

[29] The issue of social relations is particularly crucial in establishing the purportedly non-commodity status of labor in nationalized industries and the appropriate classification of wages therein, not as the exchange-value of that labor but as an apportionment of collectively created surplus value. Similar questions arose with regard to the status of work points in communes. While of considerable importance, the back-and-forth elicited by the problem of labor as a non-commodity is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it for our purposes to say that, like the paradox of the socialist commodity itself, the non-commodified status of labor was not really resolved, except perhaps by axiomatic fiat.

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account of the socialist commodity's departure from its capitalist predecessor, but also, even more fundamentally, a justification for the commodity's continued existence. As with so many of these discussions, at issue is the interpretation of a passage from Frederick Engels's *Anti-Dühring* and the assertion that commodity production would cease once the means of production were under the proletariat's control.[30] Stalin posits that commodities will wither away when all—not just some—of the means of production are state-owned, but since that has yet to happen in the USSR, commodities continue to circulate. Indeed, they remain necessary because—and this is Stalin's other great contribution to this debate—the Soviet economy comprises two distinct forms of production and ownership.

> Today there are two basic forms of socialist production in our country: state, or publicly owned production, and collective-farm production, which cannot be said to be publicly owned. In state enterprises, the means of production and the product of production are national property. In the collective farm, although the means of production (land, machines) do belong to the state, the product of production is the property of the different collective farms, since the labor, as well as the seed, is their own, while the land, which has been turned over to the collective farms in perpetual tenure, is used by them virtually as their own property [*rasporiazhaiutsia fakticheski kak svoeĭ sobstvennost'iu*], in spite of the fact that they cannot sell, buy, lease, or mortgage it.
>
> The effect of this is that the state disposes only of the product of the state enterprises, while the product of the collective farms, being their property, is disposed of only by them. But the collective farms are unwilling to alienate their products except in the form of commodities, in exchange for which they desire to receive the commodities they need. At present the collective farms will not recognize any other economic relation with the town except the commodity relation—exchange through purchase and sale [*krome tovarnykh, krome obmena cherez kupliu-prodazhu*]. Because of this, commodity production and trade are as much a necessity with us today as they were, say, thirty years ago, when Lenin spoke of the necessity of developing trade to the utmost.[31]

Once this division was overcome, that is, once the public—the state—owned all the means and products of production outright, commodities would inevitably wither away, just as Marx and Engels predicted. But in the meantime, the Soviet Union had to deal with the historical realities it inherited in 1917, namely, a small proletariat and relatively low levels of accumulated capital subject to nationalization by the Soviet state. The result was a (purportedly temporary) reliance on commodities in certain, circumscribed areas.

This explanation of the commodity's difference under and necessity for the socialist project quickly gained favor in China, where it remained largely

[30] Very few of Marx's and Engels's writings offer detailed accounts of the political economy of communism or the transitional period that was to precede it; that is, socialism. The notable, oft quoted exceptions are Marx's "Critique of the Gotha Program" and Engels's *Anti-Dühring*, both of which criticize other, nominally socialist theories. For the complete English translation of the latter, see Frederick Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, Emile Burns, trans. (London: Lawrence & Wishart Limited, 1936).

[31] Stalin, *Economic Problems*, 15.

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unchallenged until Mao's death; indeed, it became a touchstone of Chinese political economy, disseminated alongside and reinforced by the Chairman's own, sporadic pronouncements on the subject. When faced with a similar situation as Stalin had been in "Remarks"—namely, taking on those in his own party advocating the abolishment of commodity production—for example, Mao drew on Soviet precedent. Although he apparently first read Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* in 1953, shortly after its translation into Chinese, it seems to have made little impression on Mao upon this initial reading.[32] But he came back to Stalin's text with renewed interest in 1958, pairing it with the Soviet textbook on political economy to which it gave rise, produced in 1954. Both the economic landscape facing Mao and the leaders of the CCP at home and the trajectory of Soviet-style socialism abroad had radically shifted by this time, as China found itself in the midst of the ultimately disastrous Great Leap Forward, while destalinization proceeded apace in the USSR. By this point, these Stalinist political economic texts could function as much-needed correctives for what quickly came to be recognized as the "leftist" excesses of the period. The overzealous, rapid, and often forced establishment of People's Communes (*renmin gongshe*) across the nation and the unmitigated emphasis placed on steel production, even at the expense of quality and agricultural output, had proved to be catastrophic. These policies, originally touted by none other than Mao himself, were implemented in the name of achieving communism as quickly as possible. China was to make a "great leap" in its historical development by dint of its collective will and labor. Socialism having been achieved, communism was just around the corner, and mass mobilization was the way to hasten its arrival. But almost as soon as it had begun, the Great Leap Forward faltered: padded numbers became the norm, and communalization began moving too quickly for Mao's liking. An adjustment needed to be made within the Party, and—laying the groundwork for similar movements during the Cultural Revolution—it was attempted by promoting and engaging with (Stalinist) political economy.

THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

Mao's criticism of what eventually became known as the unduly leftist "communist wind" (*gongchan feng*) began as early as the First Zhengzhou Conference, held 2–10 November 1958, only a few short months after the leadership had fully committed themselves to the Great Leap agenda at the August Beidaihe Conference. To be clear, Mao himself still advocated for the necessity and developmental appropriateness of the Great Leap Forward at Zhengzhou,

[32] Xie Chuntao. "Mao Zedong de shehuizhuyi shangpin shengchan sixiang" [Mao Zedong's thoughts on commodity production], *Jiaoxue yu yanjiu* [Teaching and research] 6 (1993): 66–70, 67.

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and he would continue to do so for the next two years. Indeed, Mao's statements during this period are full of mixed messages: warnings against leftist tendencies are complemented by similar warnings against veering too far to the right, effectively canceling each other out. Be that as it may, Mao's early attempts to rein in those in the Party pushing for even more radical upheavals are instructive insofar as they relied on interpretations of Stalinist political economic texts, interpretations that would later serve as justification for the dismantling of Great Leap policies between 1960 and 1966.

Zhengzhou marked the height of Great Leap utopianism, with "radicals" like Chen Boda (1904–1989), then-editor of *Hongqi*, Mao's private secretary, and an alternate member of the Politburo,[33] advocating the immediate elimination of commodity production and fiscal accounting. If commodities and money were to disappear under communism and the newly formed communes signified the imminent achievement of this end goal, was it not the time to forego these capitalist holdovers? This suggestion proved to be too much, too fast even for Mao, who made his reservations known, thus kicking off an eight-month period of "cooling off" (*lengjing xialai*).[34] In his talks at the Zhengzhou conference Mao repeatedly invoked Stalin's work on the Soviet economy as a jumping-off point from which to "moderate the leap."[35] Stalin's views on the necessity of commodity production and fiscal accounting under socialism served as the theoretical basis and rhetorical background for Mao's proclamation that:

> The people's communes have to produce socialist commodities suitable for exchange in order to promote the gradual increase of individual wages. As far as the means of subsistence are concerned, socialist commerce has to be developed. Furthermore, making use of the form of the law of value is an instrument of economic accounting during the transitional period, and beneficial for the gradual transition to communism. Present-day economists don't appreciate economics. […] Some people in the Soviet Union don't come out in favor of commodity production, thinking communism has already come, while in fact they are quite far away from it; we've been at it for just a few years, so that we are even further away.[36]

And again,

> [We have to] develop socialist commodity production and commodity exchange. Unequal wages will have to remain for a [while]. We must affirm that socialist commodity production and commodity exchange still have positive uses. […] We have to expand

[33] He would go on to head the Cultural Revolution Small Group in 1966.

[34] For a detailed account of the elite political meetings during this period, see Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, *China's Road to Disaster: Mao, Central Politicians, and Provincial Leaders in the Unfolding of the Great Leap Forward, 1955–1959* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), 119–76.

[35] Ibid., 128.

[36] Roderick MacFarquhar, Timothy Cheek, and Eugene Wu, eds., *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao: From the Hundred Flowers to the Great Leap Forward* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies and Harvard University, 1989), 456–57.

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socialist commodity circulation. At present there is a deviation, as if the more communism, the better. Communism has to come step by step. […] At present a few people persist in wanting to achieve communism in a matter of three to five years. The economists are "left"; they get by under false pretenses, and thereby expose their vulnerable side.[37]

Mao made similar comments at the Wuchang Conference in late November, the Sixth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee in early December, the Lushan Conference in July 1959, and again later that year, repeatedly urging cadres to study Stalin's text and the monumental *Politicheskai͡a ėkonomi͡ia: Uchebnik* (Political economy: a textbook) to which it gave rise.[38] The intention in promoting these works was not the wholesale adoption of the Stalinist position; this is, after all, the time during which the Sino-Soviet split began to emerge. In fact, Mao was quite critical of Stalin in many respects, which arguably undercut the efforts to "cool down" the Great Leap.[39] At Wuchang, for instance, he reaffirmed the importance of study but went against Stalin in suggesting that some means of production (tractors appear to be Mao's favorite example on this front) fell under the category of socialist commodities. Stalin's contention that commodities were limited to the realm of personal consumption was an error, Mao claimed, corrected in the Soviet textbook's recent third edition.[40] The point of engaging with these "manual[s] of Soviet

[37] Ibid., 465.

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

[39] When discussing these comments, scholars have tended to emphasize these areas of critique, rather than the many instances of agreement and/or adaptation. See, for example, Richard Levy, "New Light on Mao 2: His Views on the Soviet Union's *Political Economy*," *China Quarterly* 61 (1975): 95–117; Reglar, "Mao Zedong."

[40] MacFarquhar, Cheek, and Wu, *Secret Speeches*, 494.

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orthodoxy," then, was simply to air out and circulate Mao's own economic ideas.[41] The works provided a rhetorical opportunity to reorient the Great Leap Forward and achieve a new consensus—ultimately coalescing around Mao's views and not the Soviets'—on matters of political economy.[42]

In point of fact, of course, these Soviet texts were, in certain circles at least, already well known. The Soviet textbook, for one, had made quite a splash in the PRC academe—as it had in the rest of the Communist world—when it first came out in 1954. Work on the Chinese translation in Beijing began as soon as the original Russian was released and took less than a year to complete. People's Publishing's 677-page *Zhengzhi jingjixue jiaokeshu* (Textbook on political economy) hit the shelves in June 1955.[43] Initial reactions, published in academic journals including *Jingji yanjiu* (Economic research) and *Xin jianshe* (New construction), were overwhelmingly positive. In what amounts to his review of the textbook on the eve of its release, noted economist and Xiamen University president Wang Ya'nan (1901–1969)[44] places particular emphasis on its helpfulness in distinguishing between those aspects of the contemporary economy corresponding to capitalism and those pertaining to socialism.[45] For example, drawing on Stalin's earlier statements, Wang makes a distinction between commodity production in general and capitalism as a stage of historical development, thus explaining the fact that some aspects of commodity exchange could be expected to disappear along with the rest of capitalist society, while others would persist into socialism. The key, Wang reminds us, is to be able to tell which aspect belongs to which stage:

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

[41] Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, Volume 2: The Great Leap Forward, 1958–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 295.

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

[43] Sulian kexueyuan jingji yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhengzhi jingjixue jiaokeshu* [Textbook on political economy] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1955).

[44] For Wang's early and sometimes idiosyncratic work, see Rebecca E. Karl, *The Magic of Concepts: History and the Economic in Twentieth-Century China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[45] For his part, Wang classifies the economic principles introduced in *Zhengzhi jingjixue jiaokeshu* into four groups: some belong to the capitalist mode of production, some to the socialist mode of production, some are characteristic of all economic activity, and some are specifically connected with commodity production.

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of systems of ownership of the means of production, but also to distinguish the areas in which those systems of ownership can exist and be put to good use, for example, such concepts as commodity production and value. In a socialist society in which the means of production are publicly owned, activities pertaining to commodity production are restricted to goods for personal consumption; and the area in which the law of value is operative is also limited.[46]

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

But whereas the initial interest in the Soviet textbook seems to have been mainly limited to theorists and academics, like Wang, the work later became central to the more widespread popularization of political economy in the Great Leap Forward, prefiguring the formula for general political economic "study" and "reading" that would also be used in the 1970s. This push was highly regularized. First identified by Mao as suggested reading in late 1958, by the Lushan Conference of July 1959 all cadres above the county secretary level were explicitly required to form small groups devoted to the study of the textbook's section on socialism. As a blanket requirement, it applied to even the highest echelons of the Party. Then-president Liu Shaoqi (1898–1969), for example, began conducting his so-called "Hainan Seminar" in November 1959 during a month's sick leave,[47] while Mao himself began his study in Hangzhou on 10 December in the company of his private secretaries Chen Boda and Tian Jiaying (1922–1966), as well as Hu Sheng (1918–2000) and Deng Liqun (1915–2015), both involved with *Hongqi* at the time and trusted *xiucai*.[48] Mao's small group met six days a week for a few hours in the late afternoon and evening until early 1960, when the participants convened intermittently in Shanghai and Guangzhou. They covered no more than twenty pages of the textbook's section on socialism at a time but still managed to complete their reading by 9 February. According to Hu Sheng and Deng Liqun's descriptions of events, Hu and Tian Jiaying would take turns reading portions of the text aloud, which Mao would then comment on, as Deng surreptitiously took notes. These notes were then reproduced and distributed amongst high-level Party members,

[46] My translation; Wang Ya'nan, "*Zhengzhi jingjixue* de jiechu gongxian" [The heroic contribution of *Textbook on Political Economy*]. *Xin jianshe* [New construction] 5 (1955): 21–25, 25.

[47] For what little is known about the Hainan Seminar, see MacFarquhar, *Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, 293–95.

[48] The term "*xiucai*" refers to one who has passed the prefectural imperial service examination, but it was used in this context to denote a "loose category" of "intellectuals with access to Mao. The most important individuals in this group were the Chairman's secretaries and the term was sometimes used as synonymous with them, but others were included who had virtual secretarial status." Teiwes and Sun, *China's Road to Disaster*, 123–24n18.

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at once (re)establishing political economic doctrine and reinforcing prescriptive study methods.[49]

Prior to Mao's initial comments on the necessity of commodities at the First Zhengzhou Conference in November 1958, the apparent paradox of the commodity under socialism had already garnered some interest and genuine debate within academic circles. Indeed, it appears to have been a hot topic in 1957, during which time essays of quite divergent views found their way into major publications. This had come to an end by early 1958, one supposes as a consequence of the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957–1958). In light of Mao's own repeated injunctions to address and analyze the subject, however, a plethora of articles on political economy, with a particular emphasis on the origin and appropriate role of socialist commodities, quickly materialized once again on the pages of China's leading academic journals and newspapers. The year 1959 witnessed what can only be described as a veritable explosion of writing on the topic, much of it stemming from a conference of economists convened on the subject in Shanghai that April.[50] In marked contrast to the works on political economy published less than two years earlier, these new texts tended to be much more homogeneous in their approach to understanding the socialist commodity-form. Things turned around so quickly in this area that the Economics Research Group at the Chinese Institute of Science (*Zhongguo kexueyuan jingji yanjiusuo*), which had just published a volume of essays on commodities, value, and price in August 1958,[51] was forced, only seventeen months later, to release an additional volume reproducing new materials from November 1958 to April 1959, lest it find itself woefully behind the times.[52] If it was a discussion of socialist political economic theory that Mao wanted, he was unquestionably successful in spurring it on.

[49] See Hu Sheng. "Mao Zedong du Sulian *Zhengzhi jingjixue jiaokeshu* de youguan huiyi" [Recollections of Mao Zedong reading the Soviet Union's *Textbook on political economy*], *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu* [Journal of Chinese Communist Party history studies] 5 (2002): 8–10, 51. The notes are available in English, as circulated in the Cultural Revolution, in Mao Zedong, *A Critique of Soviet Economics*, Moss Roberts, trans. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977).

[50] For a comprehensive bibliography of such articles appearing in academic, Party, and popular publications from 1950 to 1978, see Zhang Wenmin, Zhang Zhuoyuan, and Wu Jinglian, eds., *Jian guo yilai shehuizhuyi shangpin shengchan he jiazhi guilü lunwen xuan* [Selected essays on socialist commodity production and the law of value since the founding of the PRC] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1979), 1244–308.

[51] Discussions of these three topics regularly bled into one another. Questions of pricing often had the most direct impact on policy, moving quite easily into the realm of "functional" economics. By contrast, what are commonly known as the Law of Value debates of this period remained largely in the "diagnostic" vein. For a sense of the range of positions held on the latter subject, see, among others, Lin, "Reinstatement of Economics."

[52] Zhongguo kexueyuan jingji yanjiusuo ziliaoshi, ed., *Wo guo jingji xuejie guanyu shehuizhuyi zhiduxia shangpin, jiazhi he jiage wenti lunwen xuanji (di er ji)* [Selected essays on commodities, value, and price under the socialist system from the Chinese field of economics (second collection)] (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1959).

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Despite this burgeoning interest, of course, Mao's voice in this newly reinvigorated debate remained unquestionably without equal. His pronouncements on economic theory set the ever-shifting boundaries of acceptable discourse, behavior, and policy. With the persecutions of the Anti-Rightist Movement still fresh in everyone's minds,[53] the dangers of overstepping the bounds—those to the right always more treacherous than those to the left, whatever Mao's claims—were keenly felt. It must also be said that the often-ambiguous nature of Mao's comments during this period made it exceedingly difficult for both intellectuals and Party members to seek out rhetorical safety. For instance, in a comment made at Wuchang, Mao argues that communism will take some time to realize—longer than first imagined at the beginning of the Great Leap—but he nonetheless allows for the possibility that the wait will only be some fifteen years.

> There was a period when [we] seemed to think that the fewer commodities the better, and the shorter time [they were around] the better, and to the extent that after two or three years they would not be needed anymore. This raises problems. I think that extending the commodity period a bit is better. If one does not need one hundred years, one might still need thirty, or at the minimum there may be fifteen years—what's so harmful about that? The question is, what disadvantages does this have? Does it obstruct economic development or not?[54]

As far as Mao was concerned, the answer was a resounding "not." But the difficulty for those around him lay precisely in determining what Mao meant by "extending the commodity period a bit (*shangpin shiqi gaojiu yidian*)." In mid-1958, fifteen years would have seemed insufficiently ambitious; by November 1958, it had been deemed possible, though difficult; and by the early 1960s, it would have appeared farfetched.

With respect to the current necessity of commodity production, however, Mao's dicta were categorical, unwavering, and in full accord with Stalin's 1952 pronouncements, as was made plain most forcefully in "Du Sidalin *Sulian shehuizhuyi jingji wenti* tanhua jilu" (Record of talks on reading Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*), which documents comments Mao likely made at Zhengzhou in early November 1958.[55] For example, he agreed with Stalin that the peasantry would only accept commodity relations with those

[53] Noted economist Gu Zhun (1915–1974), for example, ran into trouble with a 1957 treatise, in which he argued that socialist commodities were a product of accounting practices and the planned economy could only function by incorporating something uncomfortably close to a market. While he might have been forgiven for the former, the latter proved too difficult to swallow, especially in light of Gu's "rightist" tendencies in the early 1950s. He was briefly rehabilitated in the early 1960s. For the "poisonous weed" (*ducao*) in question, see Gu Zhun, "Shilun shehuizhuyi zhiduxia de shangpin shengchan he jiazhi guilü" [On commodity production and the law of value under the socialist system]. *Jingji yanjiu* [Economic research] 3 (1957): 21–53. For additional examples of economists who ran afoul of the new political consensus, see Lin, "Reinstatement of Economics."

[54] MacFarquhar, Cheek, and Wu, *Secret Speeches*, 493.

[55] The exact date of these talks is unclear, unlike Mao's speeches at the Zhengzhou Conference, which are part of the official record of the proceedings. Some reprintings suggest they also took

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

> There are some comrades who greatly desire to declare the People's Communes ownership by the whole people. Although they have not come out and said that they wish to expropriate the middle and small producers of the countryside, as have the pitiful Marxists of the Soviet Union, there are some people who say to get rid of commerce (*shangye*) [i.e., buying and selling commodities] and simply allocate goods (*diaobo*) [centrally]. If we were to do this, in reality it would be expropriating the peasants, and it would only please Taiwan.[56]

Here, suggesting the immediate cessation of commerce and commodity production is equated with counterrevolution and colluding with the enemy. Invoking the wishes of Taiwan, always imagined as a destabilizing saboteur waiting in the wings, renders the position essentially untenable in the PRC. Commodities would come to disappear, just not right now. The time was not yet ripe for it, and until such time as it was, acting precipitously would be counterproductive. Besides, seeing as commodity production under socialism was fundamentally different from what was found under capitalism, thanks to the new ownership of the means of production and the new, non-commodity status of labor-power, Mao averred that socialist (consumer) commodities need not be avoided. Quite the opposite: it was necessary to further "develop commodity production in the service of socialist construction" (*fazhan shangpin shengchan wei shehuizhuyi jianshe fuwu*).[57]

On the face of it, such a statement seems remarkably counterintuitive. Were not commodities supposed to be emblems and vehicles of capitalist exploitation? How did they become tools of the dictatorship of the proletariat? Did they not have negative aspects as well? Could commodities not hurt the

place on 9–10 November; that is, during the conference proper. Mao's audience at the time of the talks is unknown.

[56] My translation; Mao Zedong, "Du Sidalin *Sulian shehuizhuyi jingji wenti*" [Record of talks on reading Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*], in Deng Liqun, ed., *Mao Zedong du* shehuizhuyi zhengzhi jingjixue *pizhu he tanhua (jianben)* [Mao Zedong's notes and talks on reading *Socialist Political Economy* (abridged)] (Beijing: Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guoshi xuehui, 1998), 20.

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

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socialist enterprise as much as they could help it? Was there a situation in which socialist commodities could, in fact, obstruct historical/economic development? Yes, Mao allowed, commodity production had a downside, but it was controlled (*xianzhi*) and counteracted (*fouding*) under the current system. "The 'devil' (*gui*) of the capitalism of the past has already been exorcised (*yijing chidiaole*). Should capitalism's 'devil' reemerge in the future, we will exorcise it again."[58] To fear commodities was pointless; they needed to be put to good use, "satisfying the needs of society," as opposed to the accumulation of profit.[59] It was precisely the dictatorship of the proletariat that would guarantee that the former remained the goal of socialist commodities and commerce, thereby keeping the capitalist devils at bay. Chinese socialist commodities and the Party/state apparatus that kept them in check—the centralized pricing system was understood as particularly important, here—were thereby blessed by no less an authority than Chairman Mao himself.

As was so characteristic with Mao, however, comments ostensibly intended to move the conversation to the right often allowed wiggle room to the left. Such was the case with Mao's assessment of the capitalist "devil" associated with commodities. While the notion that, were it to reemerge, this devil would again be vanquished was apparently meant to allay nominally leftist fears, by allowing the very possibility of the devil's reemergence, Mao opened the door to the main concern of the Cultural Revolution: revisionism. This was Mao's most significant deviation from the path Stalin had forged in the realm of political economy at the end of his life, and it would have huge consequences. For while the Great Leap Forward was fueled by a preoccupation with hastening the arrival of the communist utopia, by the Cultural Revolution, the more urgent struggle was against those "taking the capitalist road" (*zou zibenzhuyi daolu*), the Liu Shaoqis and Deng Xiaopings who would supposedly undo the progress made under socialism by allowing the devil free reign.[60] By the late 1960s, the questionable and false Marxists were not those advocating the immediate elimination of commodity production—no one, in fact, seems to have seriously entertained that—but rather those who belittled the threat commodities posed and refused to deal with that danger correctly.

[58] My translation; ibid., 25.
[59] My translation; ibid.
[60] This shift is tied to the emergence of the notion of "continuous revolution" (*jixu geming*)—as opposed to "uninterrupted revolution" (*buduan geming*)—which placed an increased emphasis on class struggle and allowed for the creation of new bourgeois elements under socialism as well as the real possibility of revolutionary failure. On this last issue, see Alessandro Russo, "The Probable Defeat: Preliminary Notes on the Chinese Cultural Revolution," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 6, 1 (1998): 179–202. Significantly, Graham Young and Dennis Woodward trace the roots of the theory of continuous revolution to Mao's engagement with the Soviet *Zhengzhi jingjixue jiaokeshu* in "From Contradictions among the People to Class Struggle: The Theories of Uninterrupted Revolution and Continuous Revolution," *Asian Survey* 18, 9 (1978): 912–33, 924.

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THE REVISIONIST THREAT

This shift in emphasis from utopian longing to unending vigilance finds its apotheosis in the realm of political economy with Mao's statement of 22 February 1975, part of which serves as the epigraph to this article. It reads in full: "At the moment, our country employs a commodity system, and the wage system is unequal as well, what with the eight-grade wage system, et cetera. Such things can only be restricted under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Thus, if Lin Biao and his ilk were to take power, it would be easy for them to bring about a capitalist system. Therefore, we must read Marxist-Leninist books."[61] Here, the dictatorship of the proletariat—the theory of which was itself under scrutiny—is considerably more precarious, and the devil is given a name: Lin Biao (1907–1971), Mao's former right-hand man. Killed in a plane crash while attempting to flee to the Soviet Union with his wife and son in 1971, Lin is to the late Cultural Revolution what Liu Shaoqi was to its beginning; indeed, the two figures are often invoked together as emblems of the constant revisionist threat facing the PRC in the mid-1970s. They are reminders that no one's behavior or motivations are above suspicion, with the crucial exception of the Great Helmsman himself.

What is especially striking about this particular proclamation, however, is that it gestures toward the economic underpinnings and consequences of Lin Biao's would-be treachery. We are presented with a hypothetical grounded in the continued existence of commodities: "If Lin Biao and his ilk were to take power, it would be easy for them to bring about a capitalist system." The reference to Lin Biao's "ilk," to those equally as nefarious still lurking in the Party ranks, impels us to keep our guard up and question those ascending in power. In 1975, the main target of suspicion became none other than Deng Xiaoping, the eventual architect of the reforms of the 1980s and the theory of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Deng's attempt to incorporate this quotation into his consolidation agenda as one of its guiding "key directives" notwithstanding, he was clearly on the defensive vis-à-vis the more "radical" faction in the Party by the fall of 1975 in such a way that, despite the fact that Deng's political inclinations actually deviated sharply from Lin Biao's, in the topsy-turvy world of the Cultural Revolution, the two figures ended up on the same side of the political spectrum. By 1976, when Deng was purged for the second time, both men were classed as revisionists and capitalist restorationists.

When Deng Xiaoping did indeed take power in 1978, it was not long before marketization began to exert more and more influence in the PRC. From this perspective, Mao's comment seems uncommonly prescient. Whether or not the transition to the heavily marketized China of today has

[61] My translation; "Makesi, Engesi, Liening lun wuchanjieji zhuanzheng."

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been an "easy" one is a matter of opinion, but change has come, by any metric, at a very high price: the shredding of the social safety net, the dismantling of the healthcare system, the irrevocable sullying of the environment, staggering income inequality, and so forth. Most would argue that the cost has been worth it; some would suggest otherwise; few would dispute that the revisionism Mao warned against has come to pass—the CCP persists, but the command economy is no more. What matters to us here is that the threat of revisionism against which the masses were mobilized throughout the Cultural Revolution was understood by 1975 to be wrapped up, in political economic terms, in the commodity-form. Without the dictatorship of the proletariat to keep it in check, enacted via the central-planning apparatus and the vigilance of the masses, the return of the capitalist devil was now seen as not only possible, but inevitable. The danger was exceptionally acute. And yet, getting rid of commodity production altogether was no more viable during the Cultural Revolution than it had been during the Great Leap Forward, the solution to the commodity conundrum proffered in the 1970s being much the same as that advocated in the late 1950s: bureaucratic control, on the one hand, and "read[ing] Marxist-Leninist books," on the other. The big difference now was that commodities, even of the socialist variety, were understood to be infinitely more dangerous—ticking time-bombs of capitalism, just waiting to go off.

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

> After the socialist reform of the ownership of the means of production was basically complete, the capitalist economy became a socialist economy of national investment, and the individualized economy became a collective socialist economy. This was a great leap (*feiyue*) from a system of private ownership to a system of public ownership, a great historical transformation. However, as long as national ownership and collective ownership coexist within socialist society, as long as the economy of national ownership has not fully succeeded in distributing plentiful and varied goods throughout society following the principle of "to each according to his needs," then we must maintain a commodity system. This kind of commodity system remains a productive terrain for capitalism and the bourgeoisie.[62]

The notion that even *the current* commodity system—a system that was vaunted as radically different from that found under capitalism—could still undermine the socialist project was a very sobering thought, one regularly expressed using agricultural tropes. The commodity system could, and if unchecked would, give rise to revisionism and capitalism just as fertile

[62] My translation; Zheng Kai. "Zhengque renshi wo guo de shangpin zhidu" [Correctly address China's commodity system]. *Hongqi* 7 (1975): 32–36, 33.

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"soil" or "terrain" (*turang*) would facilitate the growth of (cash) crops.[63] Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, and (implicitly) Deng Xiaoping were accused of intentionally developing this ability by instituting small-scale economic reforms permitting greater private ownership and exchange. Their goal in advocating such policies was attacked as "using the unfettered expansion of the commodity system and monetized exchange, the development of capitalist factors (*yinsu*), and the cultivation (*peizhi*) of bourgeois elements in order to realize their evil plan (*zuiwu yinmou*) to restore capitalism."[64] Failure to acknowledge the propensity of socialist commodities to foster capitalism under certain circumstances (even under socialism!) would lead to a loss of vigilance against, and the return to prominence of, the concept of "bourgeois right" (*zichanjieji faquan*), especially as it pertained to the (capitalist) exploitation of labor.[65] "Bourgeois right" would then allow a deeply unequal and ultimately exploitative system to take hold in the name of a certain brand of universal fairness, by effacing important underlying distinctions between different kinds of labor.[66] Since the commodity-form was defined, in part, by exchange-value and therefore by a scheme of labor equivalence, socialist commodities held within themselves the key to socialism's destruction. In short, if they were left unchecked, the country would fall prey to the revisionist line, as the Soviet Union had done, according to this view, under Khrushchev and Brezhnev.[67]

This anti-revisionist position did more than take issue with recent trends in the USSR; it diverged from the Soviet theory of the early 1950s as well. Stalin, for one, had been adamant that socialist commodities were *not* harbingers of capitalism's impending return. "Commodity production leads to capitalism only *if* there is private ownership of the means of production, *if* labour power appears in the market as a commodity which can be bought by the capitalist and exploited in the process of production, and *if*, consequently, the system of exploitation of wageworkers by capitalists exists in the country."[68] Since the Soviet Union was "a society where private ownership of the means

[63] If the commodity system as a whole was understood as the "soil" from which capitalism would re-emerge, individual commodities were understood to hold the "sprouts (*mengya*) of all the contradictions of capitalist society," as evidenced by the fact that Marx took the commodity form as the starting point for his analysis of capitalism. Xu, *Zhengzhi*, 47.

[64] My translation; Zheng, "Zhengque," 34.

[65] First articulated by Zhang Chunqiao: "It should be noted that this formulation concerning bourgeois rights in the socialist state was totally new [in Marxist theory]." Russo, "How Did the Cultural Revolution End?" 244. See also Zhang, "Lun dui zichanjieji de quanmian zhuanzheng."

[66] By the end of the Cultural Revolution, "bourgeois right" and its antagonistic relationship to the dictatorship of the proletariat emerged as a topic of great concern. Discursively, the danger purportedly posed by "bourgeois right" to the command economy was much the same as that earlier attributed to the "Law of Value," were it to operate outside the realm of personal consumption. The latter was associated with market mechanisms; the former remained a threat even in the absence of such reforms, though it could be exacerbated by them.

[67] Zheng, "Zhengque," 35.

[68] Emphasis in the English translation; Stalin, *Economic Problems*, 15.

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of production, the system of wage labour, and the system of exploitation have long ceased to exist," there was, according to Stalin, no danger of a capitalist renaissance.[69] As long as commodities circulated within this environment, one particularly circumscribed to personal consumption, they would not hinder the country's progress toward communism. On the contrary, they would hasten its arrival and, therefore, their numbers and availability could be increased without qualm.

The position espoused in the Chinese Cultural Revolution was considerably more complex, despite its continuing reliance on Stalin's explanation of the socialist commodity's origin. Socialist commodities could easily lead down the capitalist road. Therefore, once the capitalist tendency hidden within socialist commodities was acknowledged, it needed to be struggled against and counteracted, lest it undo socialism from the inside. But this did not mean a reduction in commodities; rather, it meant strengthening the power of the economic plan. "There are some who believe that increasing our control of the commodity system means reducing commodity production. This is […] a mistake. In reality, it is not that we have too many commodities in this country, but that we have too few. We cannot meet the needs of [industrial] production and daily life. From now on, we must develop commodity production according to the socialist path, following Party policy, and under the direction of the leadership and the [economic] plan."[70] As Mao had indicated in 1958, continued historical progress—or, what amounts to much the same thing: the fight against revisionism—required the increased availability of commodities of daily use in order to meet the ever-growing needs of the populace, despite the fact that the commodity-form itself was a holdover (*yiliu*) from an earlier stage of development. Shortage and scarcity were identified by all as problems that needed to be overcome; the difficulty for those involved in policy decisions, as during the Great Leap Forward, was to ameliorate these issues without allowing capitalism to germinate in the commodity system's fertile soil.

A LITTLE BIT OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

The broad masses, on the other hand, were by no means off the hook in this formulation. For the average worker, peasant, and soldier in the late Cultural Revolution, the primary concern was not how to balance economic necessity with the dangers of revisionist "material incentives" (*wuzhi ciji*) when taking political action, but rather how to maintain, and even heighten, vigilance against those who would make (or had already made) a deal with the capitalist devil. It was in this spirit that Mao called on *everyone*—not just

[69] Ibid., 14.
[70] My translation; Zheng, "Zhengque," 36.

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Party leaders—to "read Marxist-Leninist books."[71] Which "Marxist-Leninist books" Mao had in mind was initially left unspecified, but it took little time for the study of the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat to take a turn toward the political economic. In April 1975, for example, *Hongqi* published an analysis of the Hunan *huaguxi* (a regional opera form), "Song huo lushang" (Delivering goods on the road) in relation to "the struggle between two kinds of thought on commodity exchange."[72] Everything became subject to a political economic reading, which then determined whether it was politically acceptable. This was by no means new; "diagnostic" economic theory had long been a staple of CCP rhetoric and criticism, one tool among many with which to declare something beyond the pale. Ideally, however, it was not just the usual Party hacks who would now invoke the vocabulary of political economy. The goal was to promote a political economy "freed from the classroom and reading room [that] increasingly became a potent weapon in the hands of the broad worker-peasant-soldier [masses]."[73]

To this end, a call went out—first issued in 1972 and reiterated in August 1975—for everyone to "study a little bit of political economy," and instructional materials were quickly developed for this purpose.[74] Confucius had also been attacked in political economic terms during the Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius (*pi Lin pi Kong*) campaign of 1973–1974,[75] such that, by the closing years of the Cultural Revolution, the populace had already been primed, as it were, for a campaign espousing general political economic education. Even so, the 1975–1976 attempt at mass mobilization appears to have been much more prolonged and directed than its predecessors, with its impact clearly reflected in the increased publication of new texts on political economy, mostly issued by Shanghai People's Press (presumably under the direction of the so-called "Shanghai School"), and targeted at the broad masses as opposed to the focus on Party members during the Great Leap Forward. Common amongst these new materials were short volumes of essays, often written in the model of the 1974 *Matou shang de zhengzhi*

[71] Russo also addresses the importance of this "everyone" in "How Did the Cultural Revolution End?" 259.

[72] My translation. Hu Rong. "Shangpin jiaohuan zhong liang zhong sixiang de douzheng—cong Hunan huaguxi *Songhuo lushang* tanqi" [The struggle between two kinds of thought on commodity exchange: a perspective from the Hunan huaguxi *Delivering goods on the road*]. *Hongqi* 4 (1975): 67–71.

[73] My translation; Wu Chang. "Xue yidian zhengzhi jingjixue" [Study a little bit of political economy]. *Hongqi* 8 (1975): 9–11, 11.

[74] Fang Hai. "Xue yidian zhengzhi jingjixue" [Study a little bit of political economy]. *Hongqi* [Red Flag] 7 (1972): 35–42; Wu, "Xue yidian zhengzhi jingjixue."

[75] See, for example, Beijing daxue jingjixi pipanzu, ed., *Kong Qiu jingji sixiang pipan* [A critique of Confucius' economic thought] (Beijing: Zhongguo caizheng jingji chubanshe, 1974).

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jingjixue (Political economy on the docks), a joint venture of the Fudan University economics department and a worker writing group.[76] Thus, in 1976, for example, we have *Lianganglu qian de zhengzhi jingjixue* (Political economy in front of the smelting furnace), written by the theory group of the Shanghai Number 5 Steel Factory with the help of the Fudan economics and philosophy departments.[77] Such volumes speak to the remaking of "theory" as a non-academic pursuit, as well as the reinvention of the factory as a locus of both physical *and* intellectual labor.[78]

More explicitly pedagogical texts, that is, textbooks, were also published in large numbers. As early as 1958, plans for a Chinese textbook on political economy were already underway,[79] though little progress seems to have been made on this project prior to the 1970s,[80] when a portion of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee's writing group got to work on it.[81] Between 1971 and September 1976, the group released five drafts of a tome on political economy rivaling the Soviets. Of these iterations, those published by Shanghai People's Press in 1973 and 1975 as *Zhengzhi jingjixue jichu zhishi* (Fundamentals of political economy)[82] were the most significant.[83] Importantly, both were intended for the general public as evidenced by their identification as *pujiben*, or "popularization volumes." Some 1.69 million copies of the 1973 edition were distributed domestically and translations in Korean and Japanese were also released.[84] Other publications likewise targeted a wide readership—workers from the Shanghai Lightbulb Factory collaborated with Shanghai Normal University on a volume tied to a series on political economy broadcast over Shanghai People's

[76] Shanghai haiwuju yangcunpu zhuangxiezhan gongren xiezuozu and Fudan daxue jingjixi gongnongbing xueyuan, eds., *Matou shang de zhengzhi jingjixue* [Political economy on the docks] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1974).

[77] Shang gang wu chang yi chejian gongren lilunzu, ed., *Lian'ganglu qian de zhengzhi jingjixue* [Political economy in front of the smelting furnace] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1976).

[78] For a similar view, see Russo, "How Did the Cultural Revolution End?"

[79] "New Political Economy Textbook," *Peking Review* 1, 35 (1958): 18.

[80] One notable exception is Nai Yao, ed., *Zhengzhi jingjixue jiaocai (shehuizhuyi bufen)* [Teaching materials on political economy (socialism)] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1961).

[81] It is no accident that this writing group comprised a number of economists from Fudan University as well as Gang of Four members Yao Wenyuan and Zhang Chunqiao. This group was ground zero of the "Shanghai School" of economics.

[82] Zhengzhi jingji xue jichu zhishi bianxiezu, ed., *Zhengzhi jingjixue jichu zhishi* [Fundamentals of political economy] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1975). In English as Raymond Lotta, ed., *Maoist Economics and the Revolutionary Road to Communism: The Shanghai Textbook* (New York: Banner Press, 1994).

[83] Christensen and Delman contend that *Zhengzhi jingjixue jichu zhishi* is actually a published draft of *Shehuizhuyi zhengzhi jingjixue* (Political economy of socialism), a larger project shepherded by the same writing group from 1970 to 1976 that was never finalized. Christensen and Delman, "Theory of Transitional Society," 12.

[84] Feng Chao, ed., *"Wenhua da geming" cidian* [Dictionary of the Cultural Revolution] (Hong Kong: Ganglong chubanshe, 1993), 369–70.

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Broadcasting radio, for example,[85] and People's Press released its own textbook directed specifically at the millions of "sent-down youth" (*zhishi qingnian*) languishing in the countryside in 1976.[86]

In short, in the mid-1970s political economic theory, including the theory of the commodity-form under socialism, was everywhere to be found, not only in the halls of power, but on the radio and in work-unit meetings, in the hopes that study would be prophylactic as well as productive. Given all of this, as I draw to a close, it seems to me that we neglect the question of the commodity-form in the PRC *prior* to the reforms of the 1980s at our peril. What happens to our understanding of PRC history and Chinese socialism when we put the problem of the commodity—never fully resolved, as we have seen—center stage? To what extent might the (largely theoretical) socialist commodities of the Cultural Revolution have paved the way for the real thing in the age of Deng? What happens to our approach to the commodity-form in other historical contexts when we take the Chinese experience into account? My goal in this article has been to draw our attention to the role of the commodity-form as a persistent theoretical paradox in the late-Maoist socialist experiment, with an eye toward recalibrating what we think we know about the Mao-period socio-economic project, the ideological (in)flexibility of the commodity, and its relationship to socialism/capitalism. I end with the above three questions, therefore, not because I have managed to answer them here, but because they suggest an important line of inquiry going forward. This essay is intended as a beginning. The history of political economy I have detailed in these pages, including the central place afforded political economy in the Mao period's two most momentous eras of mass mobilization (the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution), has consistently been overlooked in recent decades. We have lost sight of how productive and perplexing the commodity-form has been as a (Marxist) concept and the cultural work it has done in the PRC and, by extension perhaps, the work it has done elsewhere, elsewhen, and otherwise.

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[85] Shanghai shifan daxue zhengjiao xi and Shanghai dengpao chang lilun xiaozu, eds., *Xuexi shehuizhuyi zhengzhi jingjixue* [Study socialist political economy] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1976).

[86] "Zhengzhi jingjixue jianghua (shehuizhuyi bufen)" bianxiezu, ed., *Zhengzhi jingjixue jianghua (shehuizhuyi bufen)* [Talks on political economy (socialist section)] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1976).

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Abstract: This article traces the conceptual lineage of a statement, made by Mao Zedong and published in 1975, describing the contemporary economic system in the People's Republic of China as a commodity economy. Any surprise we might feel in the face of this verdict says more about our own narrow understanding of the (capitalist) commodity than it does about the political economy of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). As I detail in this study, the continued existence and necessity of commodities under socialism had long been an important topic of conversation in Communist circles, with important ramifications for economic planning and political movements. This article focuses on the impact of Stalin's theory of the socialist commodity, as articulated in 1952, on Chinese political economy in the 1950s; Mao's particular engagement with Stalin's work in the context of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960); and the emergence of a new, less benign view of the socialist commodity in the 1970s. I argue that political economic theory and its study were in fact critical to the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution as mass mobilization campaigns, calling into question much of what we think we know about modern Chinese history and Chinese socialism. The essay is intended to unsettle enduring and uncritical associations between the commodity-form and capitalism. How might we, following on the heels of the theorists I discuss, imagine the commodity otherwise?

Key words: commodity, socialism, political economy, theory, Mao Zedong, Joseph Stalin, China, Cultural Revolution

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