Petrus Liu

THE SPECTER OF MATERIALISM

QUEER THEORY AND MARXISM IN THE AGE OF THE BEIJING CONSENSUS

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Introduction

PERIODIZING THE POST-1989 WORLD ORDER

The year 1990 is remembered by many as the annus mirabilis of queer theory. In addition to the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, David M. Halperin's *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1990 also saw Teresa de Lauretis's coinage of the term *queer theory* as the title of a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz. But 1990 was also the year when a new economic relationship of mutual vassalage between the United States and China began to take shape, one that would eventually lead commentators to speculate, in the wake of the 2007–10 subprime mortgage crisis, that an alternative Chinese economic model called the *Beijing Consensus*—with its huge holdings of US government debt, productive capacity, and high savings rates—would enable the formerly socialist country to displace the United States as the center of global capitalism.[1] In 1989, while US academics were finalizing the inaugural texts of what would come to be known as queer theory, the rest of the world was in revolutionary fervor. With unprecedented spontaneity and scope, the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations in China sent shock waves through the socialist world that catalyzed the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc. In 1991 the US invasion of Iraq shattered any residual illusion that US-led capitalism could continue to expand without imperialism.

Belatedly, the crises of 1989–91 helped us realize that capitalism has always been racial capitalism—one that requires a geopolitical "outside" of

differentially valued human populations and labor. If the global capitalist order seemed temporarily stable in the mid-twentieth century with a mass-consumption market backed up by US military hegemony, by the birth year of queer theory it had come undone by surges of antisystemic movements around the globe. The prolonged period of stagflation and decline in the rate of capitalist profit, which Robert Brenner identifies as having begun in 1965–73, induced a "flexible" mode of accumulation that relocated US capital to China and other low-wage sites for new rounds of expansion to counter the effects of underconsumption, rising production costs, and labor unrest.[2] As US workers demanded more codified protections from the modern welfare state, the flexible regime of post-Fordist production was able to counter the effects of declining profitability by turning workers in the global South into atomized and replaceable sources of value. With newly established subcontracting networks, US corporations outsourced the manufacturing of low-value-added products to China and transformed it into the "factory of the world."[3]

It turned out, however, that China was no ordinary factory. With its huge supply of low-cost, high-quality labor thanks to Mao Zedong-era investments in public health and mass literacy, a well-developed transportation and logistics infrastructure, a vast internal consumer market, and the technical know-how brought in by capitalists from Hong Kong and Taiwan, China quickly emerged as a core capitalist power in its own right and is now manufacturing products at all levels of the value chain.[4] Within a few decades of its market reforms, China became the largest single holder of US government debt and by 2020 had surpassed the United States as the world's largest recipient of foreign direct investment. In this process China has also reinvented itself from the victim of colonialism to a neocolonial power itself, boasting massive holdings in resource-rich countries in Africa and other parts of the global South. The Beijing Consensus represents global capitalism's latest mutation, with which materialist queer critics in North America have not yet caught up in their theorizations of the nexus of class- and gender-based oppression.

As both an economic beneficiary of late capitalism and a breeding ground for its new crises, China in the age of the Beijing Consensus has produced new forms of proletarianization and insurgency. After the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, the Chinese Communist Party under Deng Xiaoping adopted a new model of economic development designed to accelerate the accumulation of capital through the privatization of state-owned enterprises. To maintain competitiveness after China's accession to the World Trade Organization, the government sacked over forty million workers in state-owned enterprises

and replaced them with migrant workers from rural China.[5] Massive labor strikes arose after the smashing of the "iron rice bowl" expelled workers from the circuit of production in China's industrial rustbelt (the northeast), while migrant workers in the export-oriented sunbelt (Guangdong) organized street protests and factory occupations against their treatment as second-class citizens.[6] As many of the displaced and dispossessed workers are women relegated to gender-specific sectors (*dagongmei*), these structural inequalities also inaugurated a renewed feminist (and, later, queer) politics that infused questions of gender and sexuality into the debates about China's neoliberal experiments. While gender- and sexuality-based minorities mobilize against the dispossessive logic of capital, other forms of organized resistance also enter the fray to reveal just how little consensus there is in the Beijing Consensus.

Despite the Chinese state's aggressive promoting of nationalism to fill the ideological vacuum left by the discrediting of Maoism, the "Chinese Dream" of the Xi Jinping era has failed to mask Beijing's exploitative and oppressive policies toward its various "souths": Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang (a point to which I return in chapter 4). Though diverse in causes, antisystemic movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan—from the 2014 Umbrella and Sunflower Movements to the 2019–20 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement—reveal social antagonisms that cannot be easily assimilated into China's "harmonious society" growth narrative. This punctuated history indicates that China's reintegration into the capitalist world economy is anything but a smooth or homogeneous process. Instead, it requires the subsumption or reordering of social relations—racialized, gendered, and sexual—that are not commonly recognized as relevant to capital accumulation. Indeed, what counts as "value" in capitalist dynamics is always governed by culturally informed assemblages of kinship, genders, and sexualities.[7] Moreover, as my analysis of China's agrarian hinterlands and engagement in Africa shows, these social relations are reproduced across geographic spaces that are excluded from generalized commodity circulation. The case of China demonstrates that capital, in its quest to produce value, requires spaces and populations that are racialized and gendered.

Through the study of China's postsocialist political economy in the age of the Beijing Consensus, *The Specter of Materialism* proposes a new theory of capital as the relentless drive to subsume and restructure relations of gender and sexuality in geopolitically segregated spaces. This book presents a history of labor struggles as well as the reconfiguration of gendered

and sexual subjects—their bodily hexis, trajectories of desire, and scenes of identification—across transnational routes of accumulation and dispossession created by capital's "spatial fixes." With particular attention to capital's dispossessive power, my analysis reveals dimensions of social mediation that do not lend themselves to a multiculturalist analysis of identity-based discrimination.

The dilemmas and insurgencies of the Beijing Consensus have birthed new political discourses that are distinct from the liberal multiculturalist framework in the West. *The Specter of Materialism* is informed by new democracy theories formulated by Tiananmen dissidents, the scholarship on agrarian capitalism developed by the so-called New Left in China, Asian Marxist revisionist history of the Cold War, and queer Marxist writings associated with the inter-Asia cultural studies movement. Surprisingly, none of the foundational texts of US-based queer theory made any mention of the revolutions of 1989 or emergent forms of political radicalism from the East. Instead of giving us an updated vocabulary for political engagement and solidarity in these crisis-ridden force fields of world capitalism, queer theory—wittingly or unwittingly—promoted an image of the United States as the sole agent of its own fate.

For much of 1990s queer theory, the United States was not merely a self-contained society; it was a disembodied location. Claiming that the so-called Great Gay Migration—the postwar settlement of American GIs in coastal urban centers such as New York and San Francisco—invented a newfound homosexual identity that was not to be found anywhere else, queer theory adamantly denied the coevalness of China and America at precisely the historical moment of US capital's accelerated relocation to China in search of cheaper and more docile labor. Phrases such as "homosexuality as we understand it today" and "binary thought in the modern West" suffused early queer theory, fortifying an imaginary link among Plato's *Symposium*, the sexological writings of Magnus Hirschfeld, the Stonewall riots, and Henry James in a unilinear and self-referential history of sexuality. According to this view, homosexuality was a distinctly Western invention and a by-product of North Atlantic industrial capitalism. If homosexuals also exist in non-Western societies, they must be belated copies created by globalization or colonialism.

Queer theory's 1990s project of discovering a past historical consciousness as critique ended up naturalizing precisely what it was supposed to explain: the reproduction of power over time and in geographically discrete spaces. By divorcing the history of sexuality from the history of global capital, queer

theory ended up substituting a liberal multiculturalist ethics of difference for a systemic analysis of the institutions and apparatuses that produce these exclusions in the first place. But the particular way China entered the world of global capital presents an opportunity for queer theory to develop a more analytically precise vocabulary (and politics) for deciphering the matrix of gendered life and political economy. As a novel form of capital accumulation that dispossesses nonnormative gender and sexual subjects, the Beijing Consensus reveals both the indispensability and the limits of concepts developed by Karl Marx's critique of political economy for contemporary queer thinking on matter, materiality, and materialism.

The Specter of Materialism argues that the emergence of queer theory was not a liberal achievement, as conventional explanations of the gradual consolidation of rights-based movements and nonnormative identities in the United States typically claim. Rather, it was part and parcel of crises brought about by the contradictory developments of capitalism on a global scale. As my analysis shows, US capital's accelerated relocation to China as a solution to underconsumption and rising labor costs created the conditions for China's own neoliberal transformations and new inequalities. Liberal queer theory's inability to devise effective responses to these global crises returns as the specter of materialism, manifesting itself as persistent calls for a materialist shift from questions of representation and performativity to those of dispossession, precarity, and the differential distribution of life chances. This materialist turn presents an opportunity to dialogue more fully with Marxist scholarship in the humanities, which has evolved from a 1980s-style ideology critique of false consciousness to the analysis of capitalism's dependency on "indispensably disposable" populations who are racialized and gendered.[8] Despite these shifts, materialist queer theory has reached an apparent impasse and finds itself continuously absorbed into the liberal project of diversity management, where the concept of class is read as a static form of social advantage among others. This theoretical and political weakness, I contend, stems from queer theory's incomplete understanding of capitalism's contemporary transformations, of which China has been at the center. Through the analysis of how relations of gender and sexuality have been reconfigured or subsumed to meet the needs of capital in new regimes of accumulation and dispossession, this book offers a history of collective struggles that are at once queer and labor based. In so doing, *The Specter of Materialism* develops a new framework for understanding the nexus between queerness and material life.

This approach to materialism, which combines both economic and cultural questions, necessarily challenges the premises of more commonly seen forms of queer anticapitalist analysis, which have largely focused on empowering multiply disadvantaged (for example, working-class and nonbinary) individuals. At best, the liberal project is directed at fairly redistributing the diminishing surpluses of capital within the United States instead of seeking capitalism's demise. By contrast, a materialist theory of how capital accumulation requires and produces the hierarchical differentiation of gendered bodies has the advantage of connecting queer struggles to a broader range of international social movements.[9] The case of China provides an indispensable perspective on the reordering of capital's relation to its "constitutive outsides." To expand this framework of materialist queer analysis, I offer a wide array of historical examples of the subsumption of social differences under capital's self-reproduction, from the creation of new gendered classes and the financialization of China's rural hinterlands to philosophical debates about the analytic distinction between sex and gender that occurred in the wake of socialism's collapse in the age of the Beijing Consensus.

The Beijing Consensus

Coined in the mid-1990s and popularized by Joshua Cooper Ramo in 2004, the concept of the Beijing Consensus articulates the belief that postreform China has invented a distinct model of development that has created high-speed economic growth without sacrificing national autonomy or repudiating the global necessity of socialism.[10] Supporters of the Beijing Consensus thesis regard China's investment in South-South Cooperation programs and multilateral treaties as an alternative to Washington's America First, unilateralist foreign policy. For some, the Beijing Consensus is a continuation of the anti-imperialist project of Bandung-era tricontinentalism and a reflection that China has achieved a socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics rather than capitalism.[11] Though it is common for Western observers to treat post-1978 China as a mere variant of global neoliberalism, Chinese intellectuals argue that China is a socialist and not a capitalist country, that it is still developing within the parameters of the 1949 revolution, and that its success is a product of China's revolutionary socialism, not a consequence of its integration into the world economy.[12]

Chinese commentators criticize the equation of China's prodigious ascent in the postreform era with neoliberalism in the United Kingdom and

the United States, contending that this conflation is a faulty Eurocentric interpretation of global developments.[13] They emphasize that while certain features of contemporary China superficially resemble those of a dynamic late-capitalist economy, we cannot discount that this modernity was created by a revolutionary-socialist legacy and consequently contains elements that are poorly understood and theorized by international commentators. These elements, which I consider in greater detail in chapter 1, include the land-tenure system, the three rural issues (*sannong wenti*, namely, agriculture, rural areas, and the peasantry), and the absence of a recognizable bourgeoisie and private property rights. Whether China is still (or has ever been) socialist remains a question of utmost importance that is haunting the international Left, which is struggling to formulate effective responses to problems that defy the logics of the multiculturalist toolbox. It haunts China as well, for sure, presenting a political problem that Carlos Rojas and Ralph Litzinger aptly describe as the "ghost protocol" of three mutually imbricated sets of spectral aspirations: the promises of capitalism (the ghosts of global capital), the institutional legacy of the Maoist regime (shades of Mao), and the spirit of Marxist resistance (specters of Marx).[14]

By contrast, international commentators use the term *Beijing Consensus* to characterize present-day China, alongside Russia and Iran, as the site of "authoritarian capitalism."[15] To many working in gender and sexual justice movements, the Beijing Consensus represents a form of "debt-trap diplomacy" that focuses on infrastructure deals, energy projects, and extractive industries in Africa, Latin America, and other parts of the global South as a means of expanding its capitalist power, often with devasting consequences for women and gender minorities.[16] My aim is not to adjudicate on these debates about whether China is socialist or capitalist, neocolonial or liberationist. Rather, my interest lies in theorizing the reasons these debates are imbricated in and persistently displaced by questions of gender and sexuality. Reading these narratives dialectically, I make a critical return to Marx's concept of real and formal subsumption to develop a stronger form of materialist queer theory.

Materialism, Dispossession, and the Subsumption of Labor

What is materialism? And how does it serve as a critical philosophy for global queer Marxism to move beyond the critique of surface inequalities? In the United States, the prevailing model for discussion about social justice centers on a liberal language of tolerance, respect, inclusion, and diversity, with the

primary goal of creating equal educational and employment opportunities for historically underrepresented minorities. While we owe many of the most successful political agendas in recent decades to liberal critiques, the inclusion/exclusion logic focuses on reforming the culture of the stakeholders and construes the problem as the perpetuation of stereotypes at the level of thought. The concept of inclusivity sometimes obscures the material conditions underlying the systemic reproduction of social inequalities, while naturalizing an abstract notion of democracy that treats the speaking subjects as equal partners without interrogating the power relations that limit access to dialogue and condition its form.

The ubiquitous mantra "Antiracism begins with education!" is an example of the fantasy that racism, sexism, heterosexism, and assorted phobias are mere mental attitudes that devalue certain populations and cause social harm and that once we remove these attitudes by reeducating those sufficiently privileged to attend a university, we also remove all problems in society.[17] Instead of the mental attitudes of the privileged, the starting point of a materialist analysis is the agency of the oppressed. As Marx writes in the famous eleventh thesis on Ludwig Feuerbach—"the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it"—a materialist analysis shifts the conversation from a matter of language policing to the conditions of possibility for political action.[18] Before we can reform language (prejudicial or respectful, in the classroom or the streets), we must transform the material conditions that authorize certain individuals to speak, act, or write in socially legible ways.

Materialism is not synonymous with the primacy of economics. Nor does Marxism require an economic formalism that inevitably relapses into an epistemological foundationalism or intellectual orthodoxy. In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx defines capital as a specific relationship between human beings, the "immediate coalescence of the material relations of production with their historical and social specificity" that created a "bewitched, distorted and upside-down world haunted by Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre, who are at the same time social characters and mere things."[19] Instead of reducing human consciousness to a secondary effect of the development of historically variable modes of producing and reproducing the material requirements of everyday life, Marx describes materialism as the historical moment that constitutes the identity between object and thought, between the material relations of production and their "social specificity." This material moment is what allows capital and labor power to assume a "ghostly presence" as both

social characters and mere things "at the same time." This spectral presence of capital endows the commodity form with a dual character as both use value (mere things) and exchange value (congealed social relations).

In Marx's analysis materialism does not presuppose the existence of a given set of economic facts that can lend themselves to quantitative analysis; nor does materialism suggest that economic facts possess any kind of moral preponderance over cultural issues such as gender and sexuality. Marx clearly does not see value exclusively in economic terms; rather, Marx describes capital as an "enchantment" that renders our material and social worlds indistinguishable from each other. Capital, in other words, is not simply an economic order but a kind of haunting, a structure of social relations that is legible only through its traces.[20] Precisely because capital has coalesced the material conditions of production and their "historical and social" elements into a single enchanted world, the interpretation of material life requires an account of the discursive framework of intelligibility ("historical and social specificity") that constitutes human subjects. This framework determines in advance what configurations of gender and sexuality are permitted to enter the field of politicization while others remain cultural impossibilities. In turn, this framework of intelligibility is materially sustained and reconstituted. The reproduction of our cultural norms requires the support of military, police, legal, and political economic structures that ensure the concentration of power and resources in the hands of the elite within territorially segregated zones of accumulation. To "change the world" in the materialist sense Marx describes in the eleventh thesis requires a recognition of the inseparability of economic and cultural dimensions of the human subject. Instead of economic reductionism, materialism for Marx offers an optic for interpreting—and changing—the mutual entanglements of economic structures and the prose of the enchanted world.

But Marx's seductive and powerful formulation leaves many questions unanswered. Why is capital presumed to be gendered male ("Monsieur le Capital") in this metaphor, with Earth as its female counterpart ("Madame la Terre"), and how is the gendering of human beings related to the reification and personification of capital? Does the former precede the latter? Are these processes fully autonomous or bound up with each other? Or is gender itself a reification of social relations, an illusion of substance retroactively assigned to a person's interior core through a nominalizing grammar? Is the proprietary view of gender as something that belongs to the modern possessive individual derived from capitalism and its fracturing of the social world?

In this passage Marx suggests that capital personifies in performing a form of ghost-walking as dialectically paired social characters—capitalists and laborers, revolutionaries and dictators, women and men. At the same time, a deeply exploitative relationship between the sellers of labor power and the capitalist owners of the means of production takes on the appearance of a free, transparent, and equitable relationship between things. As Marx's own enigmatic metaphors of Madame la Terre and Monsieur le Capital suggest, capitalism cannot be comprehended as a set of mathematical problems without a human subject who is gendered, racialized, and otherwise produced through discursive norms. Conversely, the conception of the human as a social relation in Marx's labor theory of value highlights the need to understand the role of material institutions and inequalities in the social production of human differences. But Marx's explanation of how human beings become things and how things become human beings is not a tautology. Rather, it is a historicist argument. From Marx's point of view, capital's simultaneous appearance as (gendered) social characters and mere things is the consequence of a historical development of primitive accumulation, which resulted in the "immediate coalescence of the material relations of production with their historical and social specificity." Though this coalescence is "immediate," its phenomenological appearance is "mediated" (bewitched, distorted, and upside down).

This paradox we have seen in the passage quoted from the third volume of *Capital* has far-reaching implications for how we read the contradiction between formal and real subsumption that Marx discusses in the so-called unpublished sixth chapter of the first volume of *Capital*, "Results of the Immediate Process of Production" (hereafter "Results").[21] Formal subsumption (*formale Subsumption*) is Marx's theory of the materiality of the encounter between capital's self-expansion and precapitalist relations. By contrast, real subsumption (*reale Subsumption*) is the full socialization of labor powers into the technological system of increased productivity and scientific management. In the *Economic Manuscripts of 1861–63*, where the concepts were first introduced, Marx writes, "Historically, in fact, at the start of its formation, we see capital take under its control (subsume under itself) not only the labour process in general but the specific actual labour processes as it finds them available in the existing technology, and in the form in which they have developed on the basis of non-capitalist relations of production. . . . [A]t the beginning it only subsumes it *formally*, without making any changes in its specific technological character."[22] Formal subsumption of labor under capital occurs when a preexisting labor process—such as handicraft labor or

small-scale self-sustaining peasant farming—is brought within capital's valorization process but the labor process is not actually transformed by it. For contemporary queer theory, the power of Marx's reading lies in the insight that the capitalist mode of production does not create its own conditions of reproduction ex nihilo. Instead, capital meets, subsumes, and reconfigures preexisting temporalities—relations of production and property, gendered hierarchies, and kinship—without creating a homogeneous world. This incorporation indirectly changes the quality, intensity, and purpose of the labor process without changing its underlying personal relations of domination and dependence.

Subsumption is not the same as incorporation or integration. It also means being made disposable, appearing irrelevant to the development of capitalism. Earlier interpretations of the Marxian distinction between formal and real subsumption tended to cast it as referring to a historical transition brought about by technical innovations and corresponding to the distinction between absolute and relative surplus.[23] In "Results," however, Marx makes clear that real and formal subsumption should be understood as two aspects of the same process because capitalist incorporation requires the homogenization of infinitely varied human subjects and, conversely, the transformation of labor power into a social hieroglyphic. Marx begins this section by noting that what appears to be the "immediate" process of capitalist production is in fact a delayed temporality and a form of "mediation," "always an indissoluble union of labor process and valorization process."[24] The labor process is the moment when labor power produces additional value over and above its own value. Although this surplus value is created during the process of production, first it has to be realized through the valorization process, the sale of commodities, before capital can appropriate it for its self-expansion and reconstitution.

In both the labor process and the valorization process, mediated social relations—gendered, racialized, or geopolitical differences—are reified as objective or "immediate" conditions. Though the labor process involves the transformation of material goods, it is also the objectification of a specific quantum of what Marx calls "socially necessary labor" and the expression of a specific social relationship. While emphasizing the social, irreducibly human, character of the labor process, Marx also reminds us that the valorization process takes place outside the immediate site of production—in the market. "The valorization process . . . never enters the product materially in the form of its own use-value."[25] As such, the valorization process requires "the capitalist's ability to supervise and enforce discipline" over labor to ensure

that its products exceed the value of what reenters the production process as variable capital (objectified living labor) and constant capital (buildings and machinery).[26]

This conception of capitalist production as the formal subsumption of delayed temporalities and the reification of human (subjective) and nonhuman (objective) conditions is essential to Marx's thinking. Marx accuses bourgeois economists of having "made the blunder of confusing the elementary forms of capital, money and commodities, with capital as such" precisely because they see capitalism as an accounting problem that requires only an economic formalism.[27] Indeed, one of capital's effects is that value is made to appear to originate directly from the productive process rather than from the social domain. By contrast, Marx emphasizes the importance of understanding materialism as the unity of the immediate production process and what transpires outside or prior to it: the production of human subjectivity: "On the one hand, we find the material means of production, the *objective* conditions of production, and on the other hand, the active capacities for labour, labour-power expressing itself purposively: the *subjective* condition of labour."[28]

Instead of describing a formal economic problem, Marx in "Results" develops a theory of the human subject. If the production process, as Marx explains it, entails both material labor and the reproduction of the relations of production, it follows that Marx's theory already contains a framework for reading gender and sexual differences in the reconstitution of the human subject in capitalist relations of production. Indeed, this point is the basis of Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation—widely cited by queer theorists—in the essay where he identifies the family, the media, and culture as among the ideological state apparatuses capital requires to reproduce its own conditions of production.[29]

In Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's rereading of Marx, the notions of formal and real subsumption are understood to refer to a historical transition within postmodern capitalism, when capital evolves from a hegemonic ideology to the full extractive industry of the earth and its ecosystem, immaterial ideas, and social institutions: "In the phase of real subsumption, capital no longer has an outside. . . . All productive processes arise within capital itself and thus the production and reproduction of the entire social world take place within capital."[30] As early as the 1930s, Chinese Marxist theorists already refuted this interpretation of the distinction between real and formal subsumption as referring to chronologically conceived stages. Wang Yanan, a non-Communist Marxist economist, argued that 1930s China instantiated

a particular historical moment of capitalism in its semicolonial form. Instead of employing a stable definition of what capitalism ought to be, Wang insisted that China's semicolonial situation demanded a revision of the definition of capitalism itself. In other words, Wang understood China's semicolonialism as a regime of formal (as opposed to real) subsumption, a necessity in the history of capital's primitive accumulation on a global scale rather than capitalism's distorted path of nondevelopment.[31]

Building on the work of Wang and other Asian Marxists including Yamada Moritarō and Uno Kōzō, Harry Harootunian has recently argued that capitalism has never achieved the real subsumption of social totality across the globe. Rejecting the conception of the commodity form as an all-encompassing structuring force of thought, Harootunian warns against the conception of the notions of formal and real subsumption as historical stages created by technical progress. In particular, Harootunian rejects theories of a time lag that identify unevenness as a sign of backwardness and collective underdevelopment.[32] Instead of stagism, Harootunian finds it more useful to read Marx's notions of formal and real subsumption as the coexistence of production relations and reciprocal exploitation. As Rosa Luxemburg did before him, Harootunian emphasizes that capital accumulation always requires an outside. For Harootunian, Marx's concept of formal subsumption provides a framework for comprehending capitalism as the copresence of different temporalities instead of seeing it as a completed totality, "a way to reinvest the historical text with the figure of contingency and the unanticipated appearance of conjunctural or aleatory moments" in order to understand "the coexistence of different economic practices in certain moments and the continuing persistence of historical temporal forms, rather than merely 'remnants,' from earlier modes in new historical environments."[33] My work explores the implications of this thesis for materialist queer theory. Instead of situating China as capitalism's premodern form or its historical negation, this rich scholarship on formal subsumption in East Asian Marxist theory from Wang Yanan to his contemporary interpreters demonstrates the value of rethinking the motions of global capitalism from its margins.[34]

Arc of This Book's Arguments

The Specter of Materialism contributes to this debate through a consideration of the subsumption of various social formations that are both geographically racialized and gender/sexuality based. While Marxism, far from being a

thoughtless universalism inattentive to local histories, has already developed a compelling case for why the analysis of capitalism needs East Asia, the theories of capital's constitutive outside need to be augmented by a fuller consideration of gender and sexuality. To that end, in this study I offer an analysis of three different forms of subsumption in China's capitalist transformations: those of literature, the Cold War, and gender.

The first two chapters of this book outline the theoretical stakes. Chapter 1, "Alterity in Queer Theory and the Political Economy of the Beijing Consensus," offers a contrastive reading of early 1990s queer theory's concept of the constitutive outside and contemporary Marxist analyses of postsocialist China's constitutive outside (in the forms of gender and sexual minorities and the rural-urban divide). My aim is to establish, in the clearest terms possible, the crucial difference between liberal queer theory's and international Marxism's approaches to materialism and the ethics of otherness. While queer theory utilizes hypotheses of gender variance in the noncapitalist world to reveal the constructedness of "homosexuality as we understand it today," I turn to Marxism to develop an account of capitalism as a moving totality that, in the context of the restructuring of US-Asian labor relations, led to the financialization of China's agrarian hinterlands, the creation of a novel hegemony and South-South Cooperation programs, and the privatization of socialist institutions. Under these conditions, new classes of gender and sexuality—such as *dagongmei* (female migrant laborers in China's export-oriented sunbelt), money boys (rural-to-urban sex workers), and high-*suzhi* (quality) transnational queers—emerged as part of the new politics of human value.

This analysis lays the groundwork for the discussion of the intellectual trajectories of queer theory's own encounters with materialisms in the next chapter, "The Specter of Materialism." Here I consider various historical attempts to synthesize queer theory and Marxism since the 1990s and their limits. While some critics seek to update the concept of production through Michel Foucault's biopolitics, others focus on intersectional analysis of overlapping and convergent fields of power and conditions of vulnerability. Collectively, and despite their intellectual differences, these projects reveal contemporary queer theory's desire to develop a materialist perspective after many years of being associated with the so-called linguistic turn in the humanities. The specter of materialism is an enabling kind of haunting, one that keeps us on our toes, worrying productively about the best way to stay true to the radically anticipatory and anti-identitarian orientation of early queer

theory. Through a close reading of an emblematic example, the trajectory of Judith Butler's thought from *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) to *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), I argue that queer theory, even in those moments when it has emphatically disavowed materialism, remains ineluctably in materialism.

The second part of the book examines three historical cases of capital's subsumption of social differences to develop a perspective on queer theory's future materialization and dialogues with Marxism. Chapter 3, "The Subsumption of Literature: Lu Xun's Queer Modernism in the Chinese Revolutions," focuses on Lu Xun as a historical example of how forms of queer subjectivity have been erased in the accumulation of capital. Both inside and outside China, Lu Xun's life and work have been equated with the birth of Chinese Marxism. In the contemporary period, scholars in debates about the Beijing Consensus continuously turn to Lu Xun for a renewed understanding of China's revolutionary spirit and its socialist past (or future). My analysis intervenes in these debates, recasting Lu Xun's literary project as a queer modernism that was forgotten and repressed in the historiography of China's transition from socialism to the age of the Beijing Consensus. The subsumption of literature entails the selective remembering of Lu Xun's queer subjects despite their central role in his critical realist representation of China's violent incorporation into the capitalist world system and the creation of an ever-growing disposable population.

While chapter 3 uncovers the queer roots of a Marxist icon, chapter 4 restores to view the material contexts of a queer icon. These two chapters form a chiasmic pair of readings of the mutual embeddedness of queer struggles and the material conditions of history. "The Subsumption of the Cold War: The Material Unconscious of Queer Asia" explains why the Cold War was a crucial phase of capital accumulation in Asia and hence a Marxist question. The chapter's central argument is that ethnic tensions were created by the Cold War in Asia, and this regime of social apartheid is what keeps China's manufacturing workforce immobilized and the influx of capital from Taiwan and Hong Kong afloat. Grounded in a Marxist reading of political economy, this chapter examines the making of *Swordsman II*, the first mainstream Chinese-language film featuring a transgender character, as an example of how the economic and political contradictions of the Cold War are transformed into narratives of sexual autonomy and postcolonial liberation. Consequently, I argue that the Cold War in Asia is not over—rather, it has been transformed and subsumed. Following the arguments put forth by Asian Marxist critics

including Kuan-Hsing Chen, Wang Hui, and Dai Jinhua, I redefine the Cold War as an enduring "problematic of the present," an emotional structure that continues to shape the contours of popular culture, academic discourse, and queer identity formations in ways of which we are not always fully conscious. With this reading I propose a reconceptualization of the Cold War as a materialist methodology for the study of sinophone gender and sexual cultures.

The third and final case study of the book, chapter 5, "The Subsumption of Sexuality: Translating Gender from the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women to the Beijing Consensus," explores how sexuality has been erased from view in China's public discourse. This is certainly true at the level of the Chinese state, which is invested in gender-mainstreaming policies in part because such policies provide legitimacy for Chinese leadership in South-South Cooperation programs and capitalist ventures overseas. But my analysis shows that this erasure also comes from civil society–based feminists who understand their work to be antithetical to the aims of the state. I argue that these efforts are inflected by the contradictions of China's uneven incorporation into world capitalism. I trace this erasure or subsumption through an examination of how Chinese feminists and policy makers translated the analytic *distinction* between sex and gender. Through an account of these concepts' travel across boundaries of culture and economic formations, I also make a case for the importance of Chinese theories of sex/gender for anglophone and transnational feminisms.

The Specter of Materialism grew out of my second book, *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* (2015), and it was written in response to the valuable criticisms and suggestions of its many readers, in particular those requesting a clearer exposition of the theoretical framework that I began to develop there. While my previous monograph focused on queer Marxism as an intellectual practice, the present study foregrounds the history of labor struggles and the contradictions between capital's self-expansion and forms of social life. With particular attention to the concept of the constitutive outside, I develop a new perspective on the subsumption of sexual difference under capital's self-reproduction in the service of an augmented materialist queer theory.

This book was written in dialogue with the exciting and rapidly growing body of literature on queer anticapitalism, which includes the works of Kevin Floyd, Alan Sears, Jules Joanne Gleeson, Holly Lewis, and Peter Drucker. But two objectives distinguish my approach from the existing scholarship. The first is to expand our archive of intellectual references and historical examples for a more global conversation about queer Marxism. In so doing, I

aim to show that the United States—the site to which queer theory imagines itself to have been indigenous—is not the globalizer but part of the globalized world. My second objective is to offer a new kind of materialist queer theory grounded in a historical understanding of capital. Put differently, this book is an endeavor to rework the methodologies of queer theory through a decentered perspective on the history of global capitalism. Analyzing capital as a dispossessive logic on a global scale rather than as a matter of wealth inequalities or class identities, I offer an alternative to the critiques of pinkwashing or homonationalism in currently available forms of queer anticapitalist analysis. With this theoretical framework, my hope is that *The Specter of Materialism* will contribute to the collective labor of reimagining new modes of political solidarity and transformation beyond what progressive liberalism has taught us.