

the well-being of the people and the nation – a fusion of both Confucian and CCP ideals. For Bell, academic meritocracy is a microcosm reflecting China’s political meritocracy, also referred to as “democratic meritocracy” (p. 111 and elsewhere), which he forcefully argues is a viable and worthy alternative to Western liberal democracies.

I read *The Dean of Shandong* with great interest, fascinated to see the many ways in which Bell’s experience as a college dean mirrored my own experience at a somewhat smaller college in southern China. His discussions of the changing nature of “internationalization” in China’s higher education system, admissions processes, the hiring and promotion of faculty and staff, the many responsibilities of the Party secretaries in his college and the rather endless meetings for collective decision-making all sounded very familiar. I agree that the winnowing process of both faculty and especially staff in China’s higher education system often results in the development and promotion of highly competent faculty and administrators. For example, my former college office manager, a CCP member, is one of the most ethical and competent people I have ever known. My vice deans and Party secretary were very competent, dependable, and a continuous source of good advice. The vice president I most frequently worked with on issues of internationalization, curriculum development and technology-enhanced learning was exceptionally competent, dedicated and always helpful.

I fear, however, that Bell overstates his case for China’s bureaucracies as meritocracies. I certainly encountered university administrators who were anything but ethical or competent. Moreover, I am not fully convinced by Bell’s assertion that the virtues of China’s meritocratic structure in academia also apply to other government bureaucracies. Although he acknowledges the possibility of autocratic rule emerging at the pinnacle of China’s meritocracy, I wish he had more fully considered the dominance of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping or Xi Jinping, and reflected more deeply on the possible dangers of conflating academic meritocracy with political meritocracy.

Nevertheless, Bell is *not* arguing for the superiority of China’s “democratic meritocracy” over Western liberal democracy. Instead, he provides a strong and coherent argument for recognition by Western nations that China’s largely meritocratic political system is “morally legitimate” and well justified in placing “substantial constraints on the accumulation of private wealth for the sake of the common good” (p. 125). From this perspective, China warrants respect for its capacity to deliver good governance and steady improvement of human well-being on a par with Western liberal democracies.

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Material Contradictions in Mao’s China

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The material culture of Maoist China has long been overlooked, notably because of the scarcity of available commodities. But precisely because objects were rare and difficult to obtain, people attributed significant meanings to materials. This shared assessment led two historians of modern



China, Jennifer Altehenger (Oxford University) and Denise Y. Ho (Yale University), to gather a group of scholars to discuss Mao's China material culture (i.e. objects that are made and used). This book is the final result of a conference series that took place between 2017 and 2019. How were things produced? How did they circulate? How were they used? Paying attention to the material landscape is a stimulating way of studying people's experience of Chinese socialism.

The first two chapters illustrate how state authorities tried to imbue familiar materials with new meanings. Chapter one (Jennifer Altehenger) explores this process with the example of bamboo objects – bamboo being a local material with a long history. Chapter two (Cole Roskam) deals with bricks and how they materialized socialist modernity. Bricks became popular because they could be made widely available; their preponderance in China's built environment came to signify advances in construction as well as material constraints. Chapter three (Christine I. Ho) explores intellectual discussions about how to create design and design pedagogy for socialist China, a process that took place in many other countries in search of their indigenous identity which, as in Mexico or Japan, fostered folk craft movements. What should a socialist object be, and what should it look like? For Chinese intellectuals, Chinese socialist design was intricately bound up with folk-national handicraft, but plans proved difficult to enact once state collectivization and centralization obliterated those traditions.

Chapter four (Emily Wilcox) deals with dance props, from fans and scarves to tea baskets and water buckets. Props were an indispensable part of performances as dance was institutionalized to be an important component of China's socialist culture. They played a key role because they served as "object mediators," material objects that allowed dancers to embody socialist ideas. Dance props provided a physical medium through which urban and rural performers interacted with one another and urban dancers learned to portray rural characters on stage. Chapter five (Jie Li) considers the infrastructure used by mobile projectionists who travelled around the country to show films outdoors: generators, projectors, screens and films, as well as bamboo clappers and lantern slides. Cinema is looked at as a medium that transmitted propaganda to mobilize the masses, while projectionists, like dancers, are examined as mediators between objects and bodies. In chapter six, Denise Y. Ho talks about "outside objects," carried or mailed from Hong Kong and Macau to mainland China. Despite border controls established after 1949, members of the diaspora continued to visit relatives and send "small packets" to their families. Here, objects materialized and reconfigured social relations. In the same way that the material technology of cinema mediated propaganda, mailed goods transmitted messages – "material propaganda" – that ran contrary to that of the state.

For many people, everyday life was marked by material shortages, at a time when the regime was promising abundance. Chapter seven (Laurence Coderre) traces how the problem of plenty and need was theorized and explained to a general audience. In chapter eight, Madeleine Yue Dong deals with the transformation of Beijing's food industry and landscape in the 1950s. Although citizens' food experience was changed, consumers continued to have opinions about produce and made choices where they could. Chapter nine (Jacob Eyferth) deals with the material divide between rural and urban China. While urban residents could consume luxury objects like wristwatches or bicycles, China's rural material culture was made up of non-commodified produce and products grown on local land and fashioned from local resources. Chapter ten (Covell F. Meyskens) studies the Second Auto Works factory in rural Hubei as a case study of material austerity and reveals that not everyone could adjust to such harsh material conditions.

Overall, the ten chapters lead to some important results. First, they reveal the contradictions of the first three decades of the PRC. The regime did not assume scarcity as a goal; on the contrary, its appeal and legitimacy relied on the promise of plenty for all. But it needed to demonstrate abundance, whether real or promised, and at the same time distinguish it from consumerist excess. Representations of material plenty worked together with actual scarcity to produce a culture where sacrifice was valorized. Second, the book shows how objects of different kinds became political.

Some were seen as symbols of national achievement (bamboo and bricks), others – such as objects sent from Hong Kong – were associated with the enemy. Third, several chapters challenge the perceptions that China was a complete autarky or that its connections were limited to the confines of the socialist bloc. In reality, China was part of a global system; its international relations influenced people's everyday lives, from screenings of foreign films to food shortages exacerbated by the export of grain.

In addition to the variety of subjects covered, the richness of the book – and the pleasure derived from reading it – lies in the wide range of sources used: Party publications, popular media, general magazines, professional journals, comic books, technical manuals, as well as guidebooks, texts written by intellectuals, propaganda posters, films or customs regulations. The reader travels from rural to urban China, from construction sites to restaurant kitchens, from cinemas to car factories. This book confirms how important it is for historical research to draw on a wide variety of sources to capture the depth of everyday life.

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Calling for a New Renaissance

Gao Xingjian (edited by Mabel Lee; translated by Mabel Lee and Yan Qian).
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Calling for a New Renaissance, an edited collection of Gao Xingjian's recent essays, lectures and conversations with audiences in different cities including Tokyo, Seoul, Taipei, Paris, Singapore, Milan and Hong Kong, can be considered as his attempt to expand his artistic vision of being without isms (*meiyou zhuyi*) into one that is universally shared by all writers and artists.

The book is organized into three main sections as “Why a new Renaissance?”; “Transmedia explorations”; and “The making of a new Renaissance man.” These section titles give the impression that Gao Xingjian is providing some sort of grand manifesto to revive the European High Renaissance for the purpose of “chart[ing] a path forward for humanity in the perplexing times of the present” (p. 27). However, Gao is aware that the rapid globalization of capitalism since the 20th century means a new Renaissance cannot be a carbon copy of the Renaissance that was largely limited to Western Europe between the 14th and the 17th centuries. Instead, the cultural work as part of Gao's conception of a 21st-century new Renaissance should carry on the innovative spirit of Renaissance figures like Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo, and push even further the boundaries of location, language, and most importantly, forms of expression (pp. 97–99). And the first step forward is an intimate “calling” for all writers and artists to continuously introspect about the conditions of artistic expression in any society, community and organization.

In the foreword, Jianmei Liu describes Gao Xingjian's intellectual treatises, including being without isms, as being analogous to “a modern Zhuangzi” who rejects “extreme ‘either/or’ mentality” and transcends all “worldly constraints, regulations, and limitations” (p. 2). As such, Gao's absolute state of spiritual freedom informs his entire body of work, which is characterized by formalistic