

**Liu, P. (2023) *The Specter of Materialism: Queer Theory and Marxism in the Age of the Beijing Consensus*. Duke University Press.**

**Review by Matt Brim**

Petrus Liu's latest book, *The Specter of Materialism: Queer Theory and Marxism in the Age of the Beijing Consensus* (Duke UP, 2023), will be of interest to readers who wish to grapple with capitalism as a 'moving totality' (p. 26), an ever-changing process of accumulation and dispossession. For Liu, that analytic work requires a geographic reorientation away from the U.S. and the West. 'The Beijing Consensus' names capitalism's latest mutation and reflects China's position as the new center of global capitalism in the wake of the post-1989 social and economic upheavals and, more so, after the economic meltdown of 2008. Materialist critique, now and for the past three decades, is debilitated to the extent that it does not center East Asia and use Asian Marxism to retrain the critic's vision on the contradictions that China reveals—uniquely in this geopolitical moment—about 'capitalism as a relentless drive to subsume the labor process in the global South' (p. 24).

Liu is an Associate Professor of Chinese & Comparative Literature and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Boston University. He is also a queer theorist, and queer theory provides a key referent in *Specter's* title, for it is this academic field, in its dominant and most recognizable U.S.-based formation, that Liu argues is haunted by materialism. Materialism haunts queer theory not because the discipline clings to its early attachments to discourse and representation after the linguistic turn (think performativity) but because it has attempted its own materialist turn. Liu indicts queer theory for its broad, though not total, failure to pursue meaningful materialist critique, arguing that most of its critical efforts have been undercut by the field's U.S.-centric analysis of the interplay between capitalism and sexuality, sex, and gender. '[T]hough contemporary queer theory strives to be more materialist,' Liu argues, 'a focus on multiculturalist inclusivity keeps displacing the critique of capital and blocking materialist queer theory from forming a transformative politics' (p. 51). At his most critical, Liu conflates queer theory with liberal progressivism, multiculturalism, and a focus on 'surface inequalities' (p. 25) such as wealth disparities, and he claims it conducts 'its anticapitalist critique mostly through a moralizing language against privilege or discrimination' (p. 22). This misplaced materialism is possible because the American academy, including feminist studies and queer theory, have misinterpreted Marxism as a monocausal, 'purely' economic analytic.

Lest this appear to be a widening of the economics vs. culture rupture that supposedly resulted in ‘post-Marxist’ academic disciplines focused on identity politics, *Specter* even more strongly advocates for the critical correspondence and even interdependency of queer theory and Chinese Marxism. In a fascinating rendering of that relationship, Liu suggests that only together can Marxism and queer theory fulfill their independent promises of explaining materialism as the intertwined economic and social production of human subjectivity. The concept of ‘queer Marxism...uncover[s] [queer theory’s and Marxism’s] common preoccupation with the material grounds of subject formation’ (p. 58). Each theory understands the subject to be formed by a constitutive outside of ‘unknowable others’ (p. 63), including sexual/gender others and ever unseen laborers with whom the subject is in ethical and vulnerable relation (and here Liu relies most heavily on the evolution of Judith Butler’s work). In a sentence that would perhaps be more recognizable to queer theorists than U.S.-trained Marxists, Liu writes that ‘Marxism shares with queer theory the belief that human life is incessantly transformed by norms and forces outside the subject’s horizons of cognition’ (p. 76). More familiar to Marxists may be Liu’s claim that capitalist accumulation in the new world order of the Beijing Consensus produces altered social relations, especially differential relations along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality. Capitalism demands that culture be restructured, or subsumed, to meet its bottomless need such that gender, for instance, is there not for sexuality (which was one of transgender studies’ founding critiques) and not for itself (as voluntaristic and self-affirming identity would have it) but, instead, *for* capital.

With Marxism’s and queer theory’s critical dependency theorized in Part 1 of *Specter*, Liu turns in Part 2 to analyses of literary, cinematic, and cultural Chinese texts. Though these texts will be unfamiliar to most U.S. academics, that defamiliarization is crucial to Liu’s method of reorienting queer theory not through the West, which becomes a site of parochial queer knowledge production, but through the Sinosphere and, in particular, through China. In his boldest claim, Liu refuses Western pluralism and instead uses the frame of the Beijing Consensus to argue that queer materialist analysis—and the transformations it alone can produce—can succeed only insofar as it is grounded in transnational queer Marxism. Queer Chinese Marxism, specifically, stands at the center of that geopolitical reorientation.

In chapter three, Liu examines writer Lu Xun (1881-1936) as a contested figure in the history of China’s Communist Revolution. Rather than read Lu Xun’s writing as exemplary of social realism (the struggle between peasants and landlords), Liu makes the case that Lu Xun’s queer modernist aesthetic offers less of a representational strategy than a formal subjectless critique, ‘a call to examine the historical forces that create our fragmented, reified, and gendered existence’ (p. 99). Chapter four advances Liu’s project of supplanting the study of ‘America’s Asia’ (109) by using Asian Marxist cultural criticism to argue that, from East Asian perspectives, the Cold War never ended. The ongoingness of the Cold War grounds a queer materialist method that upends the Western post-Stonewall timeline of queer progress. Finally, in chapter five Liu traces competing Chinese definitions of gender in the Beijing Consensus, not only to reject them as translations of

liberal Western concepts but to demonstrate the complicated ways China mainstreams gender to give itself credibility to pursue economic development in the global South while simultaneously negotiating its post-socialist legacy.

Ultimately, the chief contribution of *The Specter of Materialism* is that it offers queer theory a model of materialist analysis that looks beyond a critique of the differences produced by capital to a critique of capitalism as an ever-evolving process that can be, potentially, transformed.

### **Reviewer Bio**

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