

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Introduction: materialism and materiality in Asia: intellectual thoughts and real challenges

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Abstract

This is an introduction essay to the *IJAS* special issue “Materialism and Materiality in Asia,” which is devoted to the intersections between Marxist historical materialism and the more recent new materialisms in different Asian contexts. The two materialisms correspond to two pressing social problems we are facing: the social inequality and alienations created by capitalism on the one hand and the environmental crises happening under the Anthropocene on the other. Bringing the two strains of thought together, we hope to explore ways to reconnect with the material world, and to develop theorizations that are more responsible to humans and non-humans.

There are many different materialisms in human thoughts. As we must live with and live by myriad things, it is not surprising that we are constantly interested in our relations with the material world. Materialism has thus been an object of perennial interest, from the ancient Greeks interested in the materialist universe to the current moral condemnation of consumerism.¹ There are also profound philosophical traditions about Nature and things in Asia. For example, Classical Indian materialism holds up perception of the external world as the only means of valid cognition.² The Chinese *gewu* tradition tries to understand the order of the universe by paying close attention to the material structure of the physical world.³ Yet basically all Asian societies in the last century have been exposed to a singular modernity rooted in European experiences, assessing the values of things completely according to their usefulness to human beings. The hegemonic capitalist/development logic that has dominated our understanding of the world might be universal, but we must also recognize the cultural and geo-political differences in the ways these ideologies are played out. Capitalism might be a set of totalizing practices, but the stubbornness of the materials also resists such computation. In this special issue, we focus primarily on two kinds of materialism: Marxist historical/dialectic materialism and the more recent new materialisms. They correspond to two pressing social problems we are facing: the social inequality and alienations created by capitalism on the one hand and the environmental crises happening under the Anthropocene on the other. Bringing the two strains of thought together in an Asian context, we hope to explore ways to reconnect with the material world, and to develop theorizations that are more responsible to humans and non-humans.

Many existing discussions of the material conditions of society and the cultural meanings of things focus on local contexts, and so do the essays collected here. It is beyond doubts that a sincere

¹For the Greek thoughts, see Brown and Ladyman 2019, pp. 21–47.

²Jamanadas 2012.

³Elman 2010.

engagement with materiality and materialism must take people's divergent experiences, historical specificities, and cultural differences into consideration. This collection of essays calls our attention to individual Asian contexts which experienced the dynamics between material abundance and social deprivation in both shared and unique ways. The various Asian countries we study here are both the followers and the leaders of the modernity that originated in the West, and they have tried to find their ways to reconcile the new material conditions with their cultural traditions. However, the ultimate concern of such discussions is inevitably larger issues of humanity in a more transcultural and transhistorical manner, as our generation bears heavy responsibilities for the future of human development and planet Earth. We cannot afford to be descriptive of local phenomena only, and so our essays seek to sharpen sensitivity to the dynamics between local and global, particular and universal, that the discussions of materialism and materiality demand.

We also explore the tensions between global modernity and some traditional thoughts steeped in Asian cultures, which could in turn expand the purviews of Marxist materialisms and new materialisms to be more sensitive to the intellectual richness of our world. The more capitalism has infiltrated the world, the more Marxist materialism continues to be a powerful critical tool today, reminding us how the interests of the state and the interests of the capital are ever conjoint, and how resistance is both made impossible and urgently needed. Many classical Marxist criticisms are far from outdated for environmentalist concerns,⁴ and they continue to inform us and sensitize us to the changing conditions in which capitalism impacts the human and non-human world.⁵ On the other hand, new materialisms – often presented in the plural form – are not defined by a canon of texts and are used by different scholars for different philosophical agendas. But, generally speaking, new materialisms urge humans to reconnect to and rediscover each other through the material world and the human body.⁶ They also encourage us to de-emphasize human discourses and human representations as the only ways to connect with the world, and to pay attention to the cohabitation of human and non-human beings that makes our life possible.⁷ Together, both Marxist and new materialist scholars challenge the ways western modernity objectifies the world and turns them into commodities or organized knowledge to be consumed and controlled by humans. By prioritizing the singularity of the physical world and our human body, most materialist scholars of different backgrounds emphasize the world as plural, open, complex and contingent.

Predictably, there are more and more concerns within new materialisms to engage with non-Western thought and non-western culture, in order to explore and interact with alternative ways of thinking, seeing, and feeling that do not adopt western anthropocentrism.⁸ Unfortunately, this also risks invoking a new orientalism, essentializing non-western thoughts as “different” and capable of solving problems of modernity. This problem is particularly tricky as Marxist materialism, which is considered old and anthropocentric by some new materialist scholars, already claims to have transcended simple west–non-west binary and articulated class struggles as universal to all societies. Capitalism has indeed reached basically every corner of the Earth, and we must recognize our common social conditions and destiny. As Arif Dirlik reminds us, instead of promoting the discourses of alternative or multiple modernities, which tend to valorize the persistence of cultural traditions and legacies, it is more productive and urgent to highlight the common problems we face.⁹ Environmentalism is clearly such a global discourse, which demands that we work together for our common responsibilities in rescuing our Earth. Dirlik's criticism of relativism is valid, but his assertion does not properly respond to the many efforts in the non-western world that mobilize their own cultural resources to face contemporary problems. We must admit that we have not entered a homogeneous world in which culture no longer matters. How can we better articulate the relations between

⁴Choat 2018.

⁵Moore 2015.

⁶Barad 2007; Coole and Frost 2010.

⁷Connolly 2017.

⁸Murriss 2020; Rosiek, Snyder and Pratt 2020.

⁹Dirlik 2003.

culture and economy, broadly speaking, in relation to discussions of the material, while avoiding essentializing cultural differences and endorsing cultural exceptionalism?

Matters and objects are often understood as the opposite of concepts, ideas, or spirits. Therefore, materialisms provide us with scholarly platforms to criticize western rationalism, cultural essentialism and the centrality of human agency across cultures. But it would be highly misleading to deny room for culture and the human subject in materialisms. This is particularly problematic if we take Asia into consideration, where many traditional thoughts consider both matters and ideas seriously, and where their contemporary social conditions could not be well grasped without regarding the interactions between modernity and traditions. Like the situations in the West, there are many discussions in Asia criticizing capitalist commodification and, *mutatis mutandis*, western modernization. Gratefully, these criticisms are often as much beneficiaries of western literature as of intellectual resources of their own cultural traditions and practices specific to their social conditions. Are the Buddhist idea of karma and the Daoist body materialist or idealist? How might Quentin Meillassoux's speculative materialism and the Deleuzian vital materialism be understood differently if they are compared to Asian thoughts? We are convinced that it is productive to introduce cultural specificity back to advance the discussions of materialisms, not to make superficial connections or endorse cultural determinism, but to provide more nuanced and sophisticated analyses of the complexity of our connected world.

With Marxist materialism and new materialisms as our common theoretical underpinning, the contributors to this special issue engage with two sets of concern: How do we account for the unique cultural histories and social conditions of different Asian countries while acknowledging the common universal problems the world is facing? And how can we find ways to connect to and interact with the physical material world more directly while acknowledging that such connections could never be devoid of cultural mediations? Marxist materialism emphasizes universal laws that do not take cultural differences too much into consideration, and it emphasizes class struggle as universal to all human societies. New materialist thoughts are much more ambiguous about cultural differences. On the one hand, they are highly critical of western culture and, as mentioned, condemn many problems associated with western modernity. On the other hand, they also tend to prioritize things over human, nature over culture, material over text, so that the role of culture in these discussions is highly repressed. This special issue demonstrates that bringing culture back into consideration in more historicized ways can enrich our discussions of materialism, and we can avoid the tendency of relativism or essentialism by carefully historicizing and comparing the phenomena. Dealing with the material, we are also working to rescue the plurality of human experiences and human expressions so that the different critical responses steeped in specific cultural traditions must be valued and prioritized. We are most interested in exploring how new social and cultural analysis in Asia would be benefited by a simultaneous awareness of both the old and the new materialisms, both western and domestic thoughts, so that we can gain a more pertinent view about the veiled intersections between culture and nature, thoughts and matters, perceptions and emotions.

Four of the articles in this issue, by Viren Murthy, Nobutaka Otobe, Kwai-Cheung Lo and myself, are devoted to Asian intellectual thought in the twentieth century, exploring how intellectuals in Asia have struggled to look for cultural and intellectual resources that can respond to new problems in ways more culturally and socially embedded. The modernity that has emerged in this region is both imported from the west and sprouted in local soils, which demand more culturally and politically specific critiques and analyses. This sensitivity is particularly urgent in explorations related to bodies, perceptions, and materiality, corresponding to different kinds of modernity experiences into which the Asian people are forced to adapt themselves.¹⁰ The articles also explore how twentieth-century intellectuals in Asia engage with Marxist materialisms and their traditional thoughts to come to terms with the new social reality introduced by modernity and capitalism.

¹⁰Hayter 2017; Lee 2012.

Murthy and Otohe focus on the Japanese intellectual world and explore how prominent twentieth-century thinkers, such as Miki Kiyoshi, Hiromatsu Wataru, Maruyama Masao and Kobayashi Hideo, offered critiques of modernity, capitalism, and pan-Asianist ideologies while also being entrapped by them. Struggling amidst the complex historical forces impacting Asian societies, they chose different pathways – Marxist, liberalist, various traditional Japanese thoughts, or a combination of them – to explore the universal values of individual liberation and community-building. Murthy and Otohe also demonstrate how the idea of the thing/material was an underlying, although not the most prominent, concern of these thinkers, who really wanted to come to terms with the new material world with commitments in democracy and equality.

Lo and I orient our articles in China and India. Lo investigates the political voluntarism found in Maoism and Gandhism, and he explores how they offer us sophisticated ways to understand the materiality of the human body and its relation to political participation. My article studies an esthetic debate among Chinese intellectuals in the 1950s, who struggled to develop a materialist esthetics that can criticize and incorporate traditional Chinese human–nature relation in a modern socialist world. Together, we have aimed to provide careful analyses of these phenomena grounded within the histories and cultures of these places, and to illustrate the rich cultural and intellectual resources here to articulate alternative ideas and practices.

Contemporary social and cultural issues in contemporary Asian society are also our concern. Some of the most sophisticated maneuverings in terms of suturing the material and the human body into the dominant economic-political system are happening in Asia. In China, for example, the country uses the largest amount of facial recognition and other biological tools to invade people’s privacy.¹¹ Advanced Asian countries such as China and Japan compete to adopt artificial intelligence (AI) for both social control and economic development.¹² South Korea has been very successful in developing a series of state–capitalist collaborations to control and benefit from smartphones to suture the human body into the game industry.¹³ China is also developing a national social credit system to merge a financial credit score system with a broader quantification of individuals’ social and civil ratings, so that citizens can be fully quantified for authorities to access their “values”.¹⁴ Means of identifying, policing, and manipulating individuals are highly advanced in some Asian countries, and the same economic-political structures also exploit nature in ways that produce grave environmental consequences.

Two of the articles, from Jia Tan and Ka-ming Wu, provide concrete examples and analyses to demonstrate the importance of bringing Marxist-oriented materialist analysis and ecologically-centered new materialisms together to understand how the environment and the human body are complexly sutured into our economic structure in contemporary Asia. Both Tan’s and Wu’s articles associate the power of social media with the insatiable market desire of consumer capitalism to explore how the desires and needs of human bodies are incorporated into and manipulated by the latest development of capitalism. Wu demonstrates a new tea-drinking consumption practice being cultivated around Asian societies, which uses single-use plastic cups and produces an enormous amount of waste. Tan focuses on the fantasy cinema popular in China, which features exotic landscapes and stunning images on screen and invites audiences to visit studio sets as a new form of domestic tourism. Both articles emphasize the widespread practices of the selfie in social media as a crucial weaving point to bring the self, the commodity, and (anti-)environment practices together. This new normative practice – the individual consumer volunteering to become the commodity photographer posting oneself consuming the products on social media – entwines fantasy and reality, sensations and the material. As both articles show, the new commodification of tea and nature not only alienates the consumer from the material world, but also brings serious environmental problems. To formulate effective theoretical responses, Tan and Wu bring in discussions from new materialism, media studies, and

¹¹Zhang 2019.

¹²Blair 2017; Feldstein 2019; Zhao et al. 2019.

¹³Jin 2017.

¹⁴Wong and Dobson 2019.

feminism, with the hope of providing a sharper theoretical lens to explore the complex problems in our entangled world. They also construct a new map for us to understand the relation between environment and agency, and how we must re-prioritize interdependence between humans and the world to give the world a new chance.

Together, the articles collected here engage with selected Asian discussions and practices to illustrate how we might develop inter-relational networks among individuals on the ground to face the increasing sophisticated operations of capitalism from the top. This collection of essays also provides interdisciplinary discussions about ecology, esthetics, as well as the vitality and resilience of the material in taking part in human history. It aspires to provide new ideas related to dialectic materialism, particularly under the gradual impoverishment of neoliberalism and globalization, and the general failure of the state in answering people's wants. Overall, this collection explores the "material" in the full richness of the term. The articles explore how our understanding of and engagement with the world might be benefited by a "material/materialist" point of view. We hope that our focus on Asia – a region where both economy and technology are developing rapidly, and where rich intellectual resources can be found – yields a sophisticated analysis that matches the complexity of our problems.

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