The Quotidian and the Utopian of Techno-modernity: Unbinding China's Post-Socialist Temporality in Urban Media Artefacts

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Abstract: This article critically examines the post-socialist temporality of China's techno-developmentalism. By identifying "temporal grammars" and "temporal vocabularies" of everyday media artefacts in Shenzhen, we show how China's post-socialist temporality configures the interplay of past, present, and future while aligning temporal horizons across national, corporate, and individual scales. Approaching time as a political terrain where aspirations are organized, labor is disciplined, and inequalities are reproduced, the article recuperates the political meaning of time that has long been depoliticized by the state-capital symbiosis.

Keywords: Temporality, Post-socialism, China, Techno-developmentalism, Labor

Introduction

When your dreams come alive, you're unstoppable,
Take a shot, chase the sun, find the beautiful.
Dream it Possible Delacey (2015)

In 2015, Huawei released its brand song *Dream It Possible*, giving China's techno-futurism a touching voice. Its music video follows a girl aspiring to become a pianist and culminates in performing at the Vienna Musikverein (Huawei Mobile Srbija, 2015). As an aspirational narrative of life possibilities, the song articulates a dream attainable through past hardship and present effort. Headquartered in Shenzhen, Huawei is tied to a city that epitomizes China's post-Mao transformation, from the first Special Economic Zone to a national tech hub. Its compressed development, often touted as "Shenzhen Speed," is emblematic of China's imperative of catching-up, realized through a collective tempo of intensified labor toward national rejuvenation.

Huawei's brand song mirrors Shenzhen's historical trajectory and the broader theme of the "Chinese Dream." By entangling past, present, and future, and binding individual, corporate, and national time, it makes the temporal order governing China's technological development a salient theoretical question. Through a geo-semiotic analysis of urban media artefacts collected in Shenzhen between 2023 and 2024, this article examines how China's post-socialist temporality of techno-developmentalism is articulated through labor, consumption, and mundane acts of walking and looking.

In what follows, we first situate post-socialism within China's techno-developmentalism, labor relations, and urban media. After outlining our methodology, we discuss the temporal vocabulary of "newness" as a therapeutic device that inherits China's history of catching up while flattening power differentials. We then trace the temporal grammar in the official representations of the future in relation to global techno-capitalism. Finally, through the techno-metaphors of the chip, lightning, and charger, we suggest that the state-endorsed future is animated by a commodity culture that elevates technology, fetishizes acceleration, and disavows fatigue.

Techno-developmentalism, labor, and representations of time in post-socialist China

Post-socialism remains a contested concept. In transitology, post-socialism is often treated as a *temporal marker* that periodizes the socialist past as superseded by an unending present of neoliberal capitalism (Rogers, 2010). This teleological view neglects how socialist residues shape the present and the future. A linear version of historical time thus fails to account for the uneven coexistence of heterogeneous elements within a variegated temporal landscape (Rofel, 2008).

Post-socialism, thus, unfolds as a *temporal condition* officially suspending the ideological contestations between actually existing socialism and capitalist re-orientation (Dirlik, 1989). The prefix "post-" here indicates both continuation and transcendence of the past (Dirlik, 2002). Continuation lies in how the party-state in post-socialist China remains the most powerful articulator of socialist legacies for orchestrating the present and national future. Transcendence, nevertheless, lies in the post-Maoist activation of capital accumulation, where the abstract logic of capital transmogrifies non-capitalist institutions into capitalist forms (Sewell, 2008). Accordingly, the party-state deploys developmentalism as a linchpin of political legitimacy and an expedient for deferring ideological struggles. Moreover, China's post-socialism marks an official retreat from the Maoist aspiration to transcend capitalist stages toward "a strict adherence to evolutionary stages of history" (Rofel, 2008, p. 243). This shift justifies high-speed capital accumulation as a politico-economic necessity of catching up. State-led developmentalism therefore works for an economically promising while politically de-radicalized future.

From Maoist prioritization of heavy industries to Deng-era emphasis on mass manufacturing, China's developmental history has entangled high-speed production, technologies, and nationalist appeals. Since the early 2000s, information technologies have been invested with a quasi-messianic role in facilitating a strategic shift toward "Created in China" (Keane, 2006). Consequently, post-socialist China has reversed Maoist over-politicization of science and technology by recasting socio-political contradictions as amenable to technical solutions (Meng, 2025). Techno-developmentalism thus provides a refined repertoire for the party-state to depoliticize post-socialist time.

Techno-developmentalism, as a hegemonic future imaginary, fetishizes technological progress while marginalizing the working class (Lei, 2023). Indeed, decades of market reform have reshaped workers as individualized subjects. Official discourses of "population quality" [人口素質] and " social strata" [社會階層] install market fundamentalism by redefining class as a matter of income, consumption, and lifestyle rather than the social relations of production (Lin, 2015). The state selectively deploys neoliberal governing techniques by promising "good lives" always located elsewhere and elsewhen (Anagnost, 2008), paired with socialist mores of working hard, "eating bitterness", and downgrading material returns. Consequently, the state, as the architect of official histories and future blueprint, maximizes social productivity while "offloading responsibility for the

livelihood" (Griffiths and Zeuthen, 2014, p. 158), thereby weakening class struggle, normalizing overwork, and reproducing inequality.

These transformations are deeply temporal. First, a normative temporal order oriented toward high-speed production is constructed by implanting historically sedimented power differentials into somatic movements (Freeman, 2010). Second, post-socialist privatization produces a "fantasy time" in which the dense present of labor is juxtaposed with "an indefinite asymptote future" (Chelcea, 2015, p. 362). Present exhaustion appears necessary for the desired future, as this future is perpetually ahead but never fully within reach. Particularly, socialist rhetorics often imagine bodies not as finite beings-in-time but as reservoirs of inexhaustible potential (Haines, 2011). As the future appears both near and far, the post-socialist labor regime becomes both aspirational and exploitative.

Media artefacts are crucial channels to inscribe certain views of technologies, time, and ways of life onto post-socialist subjects. In post-socialist societies, state and market discourses do not operate dichotomously but animate each other to depoliticize time through their disciplinary and aspirational forces. Market language often cites official rhetoric for legitimacy and allows official messages to seep into everyday experience, while official language reabsorbs commercial idioms to widen its affective reach (Yurchak, 2003). Moreover, even though these media are encountered through spatial immediacy rather than active search, commercialized public space, as an "attention factory," actively siphons fragmented moments of individual time (Beller, 2012).

Urban media could also exceed the immediate present. The recurring evocation of slogans, agendas, advertisements, and technological updates in urban space enacts everyday life as "quotidian utopia" (Isaacson, 2019). Interpellated by "the bait of utopia" (Jonas, 1981, p. 454), laboring subjects are constituted as means to an assured goal that may not be their own. Everyday media artefacts thus link politico-economic visions of future-making to ordinary techniques of discipline, aspirational cues, and ideological antioxidants that are difficult to opt out of.

Searching for temporal grammars and temporal vocabularies: a geo-semiotic approach

The analytical materials were collected in Shenzhen. Shenzhen is ideal for investigating techno-developmentalism and post-socialist temporalities through everyday media artefacts, because it serves as a prototype of techno-futurism and carries heavy human costs due to its compressed development.

Between January 2023 and January 2024, we collected 827 items from official banners, outdoor advertisements, corporate brochures, and digital campaigns. These materials appeared in Shenzhen's populated places and popular sites, including metro stations, airports, office buildings, residential communities, commercial complexes, and local media. Attentive to state-capital relations in textual representations, we annotated data into two corpora: "Official Discourse," comprising 163 texts from party media, government departments, and state-owned enterprises; and "Commercial Discourse," including 664 texts from private actors.

Seeing media artefacts as an interrelated assemblage of signification, we adopt a geo-semiotic approach that emphasizes the "material placements of signs and discourses" (Scollon and Scollon, 2003, p. 2). Spatially, these artefacts echo one another across nodes of everyday urban mobility; temporally, they intertwine historical cues with desired futures. To narrate abstract social time, we

identify dominant “temporal grammars,” as recurring patterns, relations, and logics that structure time, and “temporal vocabularies,” as meanings, metaphors, and aesthetics that make time sensible.

Enchanted now: the temporal politics of “newness”

In Shenzhen, “newness” [新] is an everyday temporal vocabulary. In our corpus, newness appears 211 times, while “oldness” appears only twice. Set against oldness, newness ushers in metamorphoses of progress: a new stage of development, a new tech product, or a new lifestyle. Equipped with “new energy,” people are reminded that they inhabit a “new era,” poised for a “new journey” toward “new triumphs” of socialist modernization. Newness is also scripted through transformative verbs — “reshaping,” “redefining,” or “reforming.” Against this kaleidoscope, the only constant remains “listening to the party, being grateful to the party, and following the party.” “Newness” is thus folded into temporal governance as China recasts socio-economic uncertainties as the “new normal” [新常態] necessary for national upgrading.

Commercially, this repetition folds post-socialist subjects into capitalist cycles of creation and obsolescence. Politically, newness appears as a palimpsest formation (Ashcroft, 2005): a depoliticizing force masquerading continuity as change. Reinvented to soothe uneven development and disorganize resistance, it releases a fresh breeze that repaints rather than resolves concrete suffering arising from recession and inequality: Storefronts close and re-lease, startups collapse and are replaced overnight, workers are urged to believe “new is better” after layoffs, and affordable apartments are refurbished to expel the poor.

These tensions belong to newness but are cropped out of its celebratory tone, thus occluding as much as it reveals and displacing the experiential now. It falls into “carnival time” (Xu and Reed, 2023, p. 233) that reinvigorates rather than transforms the status quo. In this sense, newness consolidates therapeutic governance by recasting socioeconomic problems as matters of renewal from within (Yang, 2015).

Although seemingly present-oriented, the present newness invokes is not self-contained but a distended present shaped by China’s history of catching up and its linear extension into future imaginaries (Hartog, 2015). The contrast between ancient glory and later perceived backwardness is politically reinvented as a “time-lag of difference” (Meinhof, 2017, p. 53) to demonstrate ideological superiority through workforce mobilization toward fast development. Conditioned by this psyche, newness becomes a subjectivizing force of constant self-upgrading.

Figure 1: "Chinese Dream, Shenzhen Dream" poster at a bus station

Newness realigns asynchronous and anachronistic residues for future-making. The "Chinese Dream" (Figure 1) narrates national rejuvenation while China's second centenary goal translates it into a political timetable — building "a great modern socialist country in all respects" — both oriented toward 2049 (Xinhua News, 2017). As Callahan suggests, the Chinese Dream combines capitalist accumulation with socialist pretensions into a "straight-and-narrow path" (2017, p. 254) to national perfection. Here, the Chinese Dream functions as a radiant future that captivates the present and forecloses alternatives (Burawoy and Lukács, 1992). Its chameleon-like adaptability allows idiosyncratic dreams to proliferate within state agendas.

In the 2016 *National Innovation-Driven Development Strategy,* science and technology are framed as "a revolutionary force and powerful lever in the highest sense." The Chinese Dream becomes workable through a techno-developmentalist timeline: to become an "innovative nation" by 2020, a "global innovation leader" by 2030, and ultimately a "global sci-tech powerhouse" by 2050 (Xinhua News, 2016). The next section examines how the future — national rejuvenation, socialist modernization, and technological advancement — is represented here and now.

On the post-socialist dreamscape: the construction of quotidian utopia

In 2020, Shenzhen's political designation shifted from "Special Economic Zone" to "Pilot Demonstration Area of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics." This renaming reorients Shenzhen from an experimental frontier to a "national model" or a "leading city." If "newness" temporalizes China's historical presupposition of catching up, Shenzhen spatializes it, sustaining techno-developmentalist appeal through exhibitable achievements. A Shenzhen News report describes:

> "Blueprints in the morning, prototypes in the afternoon, and mass production the next day" captures Shenzhen's innovation ecosystem.

> From the “Shenzhen Speed” of “one floor every three days” to the “Shenzhen Innovation” of “15-minute conversion,” this city, once known as the “world factory,” has now entered the first tier of global innovation clusters. […]
>
> In global competition, Shenzhen enterprises are shifting from followers to definers (Shenzhen News, 2025).

Here, the backward past is mobilized as evidence of successful transformation at present. Shenzhen’s shift “from followers to definers” affirms the existing developmental paradigm, converting its elements — innovation, acceleration, and hard work — into the future. Paradoxically, Shenzhen is also described as “China’s Silicon Valley” in the news coverage above. Across time zones, Shenzhen is tied to its California counterpart through synchronization, competition, and inter-reference within global techno-capitalist circuits. China’s adoption of an “aesthetic grammar of siliconization” reflects how Silicon Valley relentlessly expands itself as an imperial force and shapes “local epistemologies” (McElroy, 2024, p. 6). Accordingly, “China’s Silicon Valley” invites a distant other to construct national selfhood. Post-socialist countries often find “no alternative in sight” beyond capitalist marketization and are rendered belated (Peshkopia, 2010, p. 36). Shenzhen — as “China’s Silicon Valley” — remains gravitationally pulled into a global hegemonic imaginary largely defined by the West, despite China’s aspiration for modernity with Chinese characteristics. This epistemic struggle illustrates that the alternative often exists within the already existing.

Shenzhen’s paired designations as a “national model” and “China’s Silicon Valley” juxtapose anti-imperial aspirations with imperial templates. This manifests a post-socialist syndrome: China strives for a distinctive trajectory and presents itself as already exemplary, while struggling to find a techno-linguistic scheme beyond Western paradigms, or even if found, still faltering under the prevailing ideological conditions of non-recognition. The “alternative” emerges less as a re-worlding than as a re-wording.

Like the US Silicon Valley, Shenzhen exhibits a deterministic path of technological progress. Combining a techno-nationalist appeal with neoliberal competition, the present is cast as a decisive threshold where “only reformers and innovators win.” Yet this future is politically fixed but economically invigorating, captured by the slogan “the Party leads technological rise.”

By positioning Shenzhen as other cities’ future, Silicon Valley as Shenzhen’s future, and the present as a threshold determining the future, these official texts foreground nationally situated yet globally connected future-making. Together, they surface a post-socialist temporal grammar: the future has already been “chronographically fixed” (Conn, 2023, p. 71), not imagined ex nihilo but assembled from desirable fragments of the present. The present is thus not a precursor to but a representative of the future.

"20+8" = Innovation

Patent applications in Shenzhen's robotics industry have exceeded 40,000, ranking first nationwide.

Figure 2: Shenzhen's industrial policy represented by a robotic arm

For instance, Shenzhen's official future imagery often deploys chips, 5G bases, drones, robotic arms, or 3D-scanned car models (Figure 2). By selectively assembling elements already prototyped in reality, these images make the future cognitively legible. Their emphases, however, only rest on nonhuman agents. Humans are either excluded from this aesthetic grammar or represented as harmonious collaborators with machines and beneficiaries of technological progress (Figure 3).

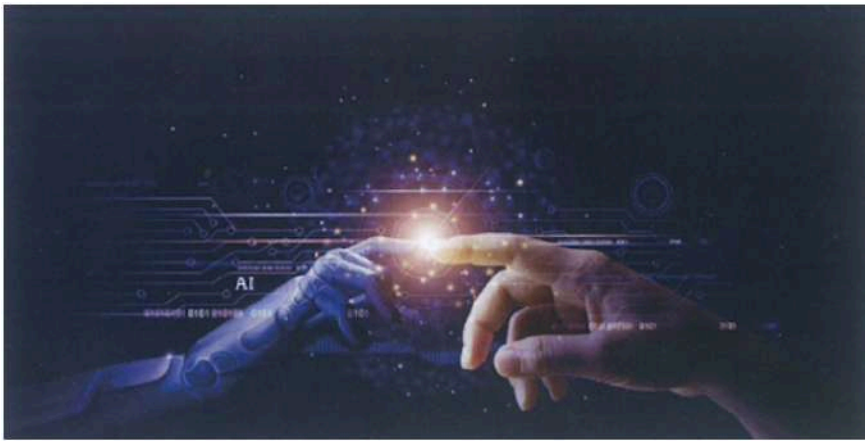

Figure 3: Human-nonhuman "partnership" in a corporate brochure

Beyond static visual assemblages, the state-endorsed techno-future is reinforced through cinematic narrations combining grand narratives with lived experience. In 2023 and 2024, Shenzhen released two promotional videos for Shenzhen Design Week. The first, *Dare to Explore* [敢闖敢試] (Engineering Observation, 2023), transplants Shenzhen's spectacular cityscape onto a pioneering starship gliding through interstellar space, flanked by smaller spacecraft. Aerial drone shots circle the city as flying cars orbit its perimeter. The spacecraft slowly breaks through galactic fog and asteroid storms into cosmic openness (Figure 4).

Figure 4: "Dare to Explore" (1'31")

Its sequel, *Dare to Pioneer* [敢為人先] (Shenzhen Channel, 2024), shifts from cosmic abstraction to life trajectory, centering on a solitary man animated by a dream of flying with wings since childhood. Sustained by an unwavering belief, his failed prototypes move from cardboard and metal to programmed intelligence, turning technological experimentation into a life-course of repeated failure and eventual transcendence (Figure 5). Grey-haired, he buckles on his artificial wings and leaps from the rooftop of Shenzhen's tallest building. His wings propel him toward the pastel-hued sunset above the urban skyline.

Figure 5: "Dare to Pioneer" (0'10")

The two videos visualize official future-making through acts of ascension — cosmic flight and aerial ascent. *Explore* (2023) centers on infrastructural imagination, turning Shenzhen's reform-era ethos of bold experimentation into an astro-futurist science fiction of collective outer-space expansion. By metaphorizing Shenzhen as a spacefaring technopolis piercing cosmic fog and asteroid storms, it signals Shenzhen's march toward the "Chinese Dream" through technological transcendence, as the national model. *Pioneer* (2024), by contrast, shifts to an individual story of self-overcoming, showing that beyond far-reaching imagination, futurity also requires everyday endurance of failure. Connecting cosmic vessels with lifelong invention, the future appears both speculative and embodied.

Speed operates as a silent language in both videos. *Explore* (2023) figures speed as an object of desire by transplanting Shenzhen into a timeless setting freed from physical constraints — gravity, friction, and even "human errors." *Pioneer* (2024) compresses a century-like arc of technological evolution into one life course. Together, the two videos crystallize acceleration as a desirable political tempo: with speed as aesthetic vehicle and everyday practice, the future is reached through speed and imagined as speed itself.

If the city-starship projects an indefinite collective future, the invention of intelligent wings stages a near future divided by achievable milestones. The two videos construct a post-socialist "fantasy time" (Chelcea, 2015, p. 348), in which near benchmarks and an ever-receding future jointly arrest the present. As the next section shows, techno-commodity culture makes this temporal grammar operative by translating future imaginaries into lifestyles, consumer choices, and work ethics geared toward desirable national becoming.

Techno-metaphors of living time

Metaphors not only redescribe unfamiliar realities but also shape feelings, imaginations, and moral orientations (Edge, 1974). Yet as technologies, time, and bodies become synthesized, the relationship between metaphors and realities is increasingly dialectical: while metaphors render opaque technologies understandable, technological logics are increasingly transduced into temporal and corporeal scales (Mackenzie, 2002). This section examines consumer culture through three techno-metaphors: chip, lightning, and charger, which show how the living present is simultaneously transcended to and domesticated by official future-making.

Chips

Across socialist and post-socialist China, techno-nationalism has persisted as a governing logic, recalibrated by industrial shifts (Feigenbaum, 2003). Amid US-China confrontation, the chip, as a key resource of global dominance, embodies China's ambition to shape the global future. Because chip-embedded products are presumed intelligent, they are promoted to "create a national future," "enhance business innovation," and "enable personal freedom." This semantic elasticity privileges the chip as a host of techno-nationalism, articulating national, corporate, and individual aspirations.

One product brochure depicts a territorialized urban futurism: a city running under AI, built on a chip (Figure 6). Domestic producers similarly market "China's chips" [中國芯] and "the weapon of the state" [國之利器], turning geopolitical anxiety into affective attachment. Drawing on the homophony between "chip" [芯], "heart" [心], and "new" [新] in Mandarin, "chip" [芯] is reinvented to denote novelty, sincerity, and craftsmanship, whether or not the product really contains or needs a smart chip. A smart bedspread, for instance, advertises "a 'chip/new' proposal for freedom" [自由「芯」主張], while a cable product "creates the future with a sincere 'chip/heart'" [真「芯」創未來]. Here, the chip technologizes commodities and folds them into future-oriented extraordinariness.

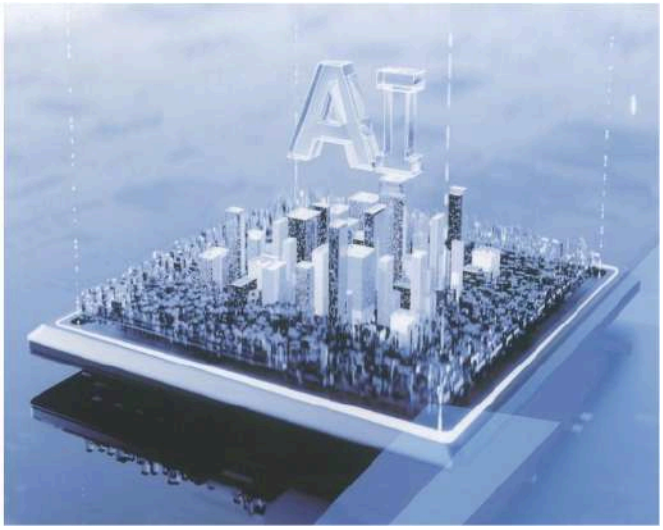

Figure 6: Chip-city-AI assemblage in a corporate brochure

Furthermore, the chip is mobilized as a spatial core linking space, technology, and nation. Shenzhen is imagined as China's "chip" executed for the national programme, from which innovation radiates outward. In government-produced posters, semiconductor patterns are often overlaid onto city maps to display policy coverage, infrastructural connectivity, and local achievement (Figure 7). Tech zones and science parks also compete to claim Shenzhen's "chip," attracting corporate tenants through phrases such as "bearing the future," "harboring dreams," and "upgrading imagination."

Figure 7: "Shenzhen Invention" poster with a chip symbol

These metaphorical processes operate through the political technology of zoning: the centralization of resources to accelerate and rescale flows of goods, people, and information (Ong, 2004). They reproduce foreclosed possibilities, precarity, and center-periphery tension (Lam, 2019), while recoding them as technical problems. Moreover, through synecdochic techniques, the local "chip," as an anti-politics machine, is made to expand bureaucratic power by representing its own extraordinariness as collective advancement (Ferguson, 1994).

This theater of progress is deeply temporal: the realization of techno-futurity *de facto* relies on people assigned unequal temporal worth and positioned unevenly to the promised future (Sharma,

2014). For instance, individuals with sci-tech literacy are classified as “human talents” and elevated as the population’s “chips.” Children, cast as “future innovation pioneers,” are raised not merely with technology but for invention itself — expected to read with AI at three and code independently by thirteen. This generational logic of reproductive futurism extends the techno-centric present of uneven accessibility into the future (Edelman, 2004), foreclosing alternative adulthoods and national futures.

The chip encapsulates a densely layered symbolic economy that operates across geopolitical anxiety, zoning logic, and self-optimization. Yet its metaphorical weight is distributed unevenly through a fractal logic of differentiation. It can endlessly locate certain sites, objects, or subjects as centers of future-making, thereby rendering others peripheral, obsolete, or misaligned, even though they are constitutive of the very future that symbolically excludes them. Hence, the chip’s classificatory logic depoliticizes differences in classed time and living time, making the technologized future unfold through a stratified temporal order of uneven inclusion.

Lightning

Figure 8: “Time is money” slogan in 1981 and 2024 [1]

“Time is money, efficiency is life” (Figure 8) is Shenzhen’s iconic slogan. Originating in 1981 when a performance-based wage system was introduced in Shenzhen, the phrase was condemned as symptomatic of “the ills of capitalism” (Du, 2020, p. 38), provoking fierce debate over market reform. Its slogan board was repeatedly erected and dismantled, until Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 Southern Tour forcefully announced the pragmatic watchword: “development is the only hard truth.” This moment turned a cardinal capitalist notion of time into the political grammar of state-led marketization.

“Time is money” elevates speed. Its companion, “Shenzhen Speed,” emerged from the 1980s construction mythology. After the Shenzhen International Trade Centre rose at “one floor every three days,” Deng pushed local leaders to move faster. The later Diwang Center reached “one floor every 2.5 days” (Du, 2020). Indexed by a 1,640-fold rise in migrant labor and a 1,256-fold rise in industrial output between 1979 and 1995, “Shenzhen Speed” became a nationwide benchmark (Cracian, 2000), while both remain reference points across Shenzhen’s construction sites today (Figure 9).

Figure 9: "Speed Poster" around construction sites

Post-socialist time is thus converted into comparable units and diffused across fields of competition. In the political imagination, speed is never a one-off achievement: it begins as spectacle and hardens into a standard to be exceeded. Speed matters only when surpassed by higher statistics or newer wording.

By 2024, ideological debate had receded, yet "Time is money" and "Shenzhen Speed" persisted, their meanings choreographed around governmental performance and market dynamism. Politically, the trivialization of "speed" through repetition gives way to "accelerated speed" in the political showcase, as in "racing toward Chinese modernization with *Shenzhen-style accelerated speed."* Commercially, speed is rearticulated through platform economies, corporate technologies, and time-saving tools as spectacular movement, statistical increase, and saved personal time.

First, platform apps describe service speed with a "lightning" [閃] metaphor. [2] Rhetorically, lightning overloads the senses — psychedelic luminance, deafening sound, and electric spark — a natural spectacle that collapses sky and ground in an instant. The metaphor naturalizes a temporal expectation beyond physical limits. As one drugstore advertises: "Too rainy or too hot to go out? Scan the QR code and get medicine delivered at lightning speed. Health will come to your door." This advertisement naturalizes platform service as effortless immediacy. "Health" is personalized, arriving by itself. Delivery labor, however, is rendered impersonal, despite the platform's "temporal arbitrage" externalizing the pressure of being-on-time onto human labor (Chen and Sun, 2020).

"Lightning" further extends fantasies of frictionless online-to-offline connections freed from gravity, "human errors," or even conscious sensing. While QR codes are ubiquitous for shortening urban queuing time, tech giants are experimenting with "sensationless payment" through palmprint scans and facial recognition. Small pilots with delivery drones, driverless vehicles, and service robots test the displacement of human labor onto tireless machines. These interfaces feed into official imaginaries of "digital twins" (Shenzhen Municipal Government, 2023), reconfiguring urban orders and orienting collective imagination toward borderless space and time, as illustrated in *Explore* (2023). Yet this futurist aesthetic, widely shared by tech companies and the government, renders the city and the body into data terrains (Figure 10). In this novel optic regime, fleeting convenience becomes an affective cover of non-stop surveillance and permanent data commodification.

Figure 10: "Digital Twins" in corporate brochures

Second, fast-sprouting corporate technologies — cloud computing and AI — frame speed as statistical increase. Since "business simply means being fast," they are marketed as compressing time-consuming business activities. For instance, a "software robot" offers "tenfold efficiency at half the cost." Here, speed justifies itself, only intelligible through numerical proxies. "Tenfold" and "half" work as technologies of trust, naturalizing acceleration as cost efficiency while making the calculations behind such claims difficult to retrace or contest (Porter, 1995).

The quantification of speed produces not only seeming objectivity but also "ambient anxiety" — "prismatic yet interconnected fears and forebodings" around technological erosion, opacity, and asymmetry (Elliott, 2024, p. 6). For instance,

> Instead of being replaced by AI, rise with it.
>
> All your competitors are using our smart marketing system.

They tout advanced technologies by staging external hyper-competition, where standing still becomes a decline once others accelerate. Marketed as relief from anxiety, they further normalize anxiety-driven acceleration. This circular process — deploying technological speed to resolve anxieties generated by acceleration itself — exposes a central flaw of techno-solutionism (Sætra, 2023). Consequently, "increase" appears only as a preemptive defense against decrease.

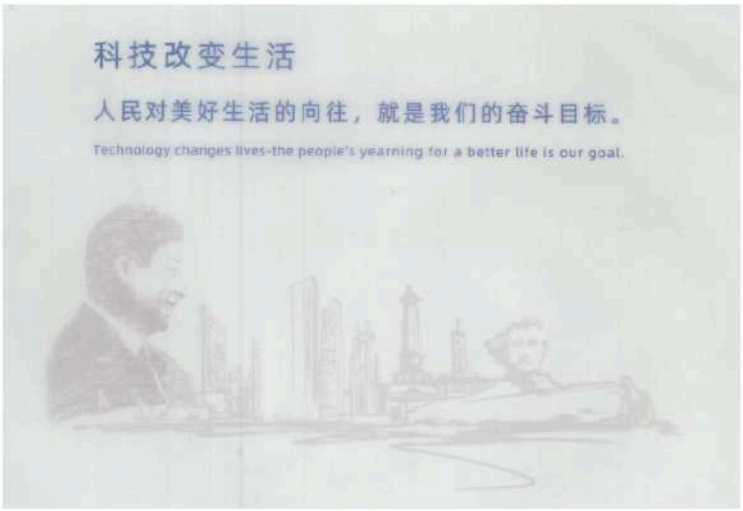

Figure 10: A product brochure with Xi's and Mao's portrayals

In Figure 10, Mao's statue and Xi's portrait situate "technology changing life" within the party-state's second centenary goal. Technology translates state agendas into individual aspirations. This introduces speed's third connotation: time-saving for "a better life." An in-flight advertisement addresses business travelers as captive subjects of waiting (Figure 11):

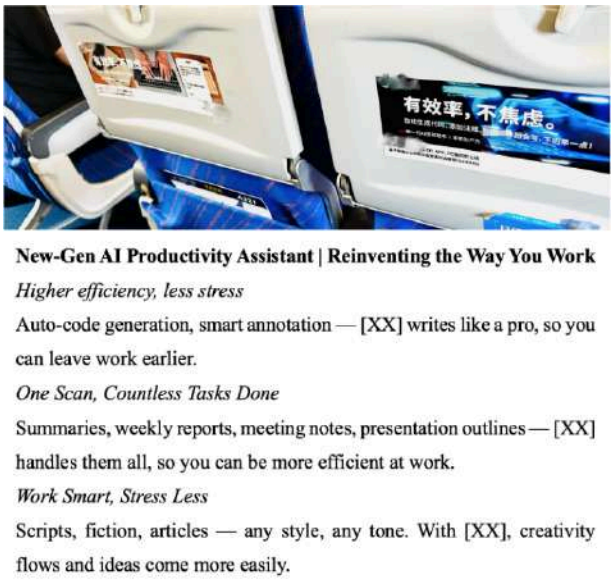

Figure 11: The airplane advertisement of "AI assistant"

As overtime becomes normalized in the tech industry (Li, 2026), AI assistants promise to redeem personal time by automating workplace tasks. Time pressure is subtly translated into a question of AI literacy. Another product, a "three-in-one super laptop," integrating phone, tablet, and PC, promises "working without waiting" across planes, stations, offices, and homes through lightning speed and adaptable form. The two products appear temporally opposed: the AI assistant releases personal time, while the "super laptop" enables work anytime. Under the institutionalized expectation of

always-on, one can easily imagine a worker automating copywriting with a super laptop during a train journey. Saved time could be reabsorbed into more tasks, as workers remain moving contradictions in the labor regime (Noys, 2014).

Unbeknownst to workers drawn to AI assistants, AI-generated "intelligent avatars" are already being employed as live-streamers, content creators, administrative personnel, and job interviewers able to "interview 5,000 applicants within 48 hours." These "digital employees" could presumably work in "unattended mode, offering 24/7 operations with ten-fold cost reduction and higher efficiency." Here, AI oscillates subject-object relations in tech use, reproducing the pitfalls of techno-solutionism.

Charger

The charger condenses Shenzhen's "Made-in-China" history: Shenzhen's Foxconn mass-produced authentic Apple chargers, while Huaqiangbei, the city's electronics hub, circulated unauthorized copies within days of each Apple update (Yang, 2015). Across both sites, workers once underwrote labor-intensive development and grassroots innovation, only to be devalued — or rendered disposable — by the national shift toward "Created in China."

Technically, a charger powers digital devices. Its everyday indispensability allows it to mediate between bodily depletion and technological replenishment, as shown in this advertisement in a high-end office complex (Figure 12):

Figure 12: A body-charging advertisement in an office building

The advertisement belongs to an archive of 251 advertisements on lifestyle, wellness, and leisure. As symptoms of "Shenzhen Speed," "unwell sleep," "overtime face," and "back pain" are framed as "modern diseases" caused by "prolonged desk work, constant air-conditioning, and frequent late nights." Workers are urged to regularly "reboot," "repair," or "reset" their bodies, or to cultivate "faster, stronger, more durable, and more flexible" bodies.

Diagnostically, working bodies are pathologized as drained yet rechargeable batteries. This metaphor recasts industrial fatigue as personal, epiphenomenal, or incidental (Lee, 2021) via a dual logic. First, individual consumption is sutured to ailing social reproduction: coffee as workers' "fuel," fine dining as rewarding the "hard-working self," and weekend travel as "the antidote to hyper-competition." They are commercial apologies for cruel labor conditions (Ehrenreich, 2010). Second, self-optimizing consumption, especially fitness, is framed not only as an escape from work

but as work in itself. Consumers are exhorted to “meet a better self” with a temporal urgency — “life is short” — so one must “seize the moment to change.” Time is rendered a fleeting, non-storable resource for competitive self-betterment, turning speed into an ontological crisis compounded by age pressure.

In digital space, consumption as escape from work and as work for wellness converge. In 2023, Rednote, a leading lifestyle platform, launched a campaign titled “*Resetting Life from Within Office Cubicles*,” inviting users to “go beyond a life defined by clocking in and out.” The campaign (Figure 13) frames office work as confined and overburdened, contrasting it with Rednote’s promoted aspirational middle-class lifestyles. Hence, it offers platform-mediated micro-escapes via Rednote’s newly launched PC version, letting workers browse posts on office computers without appearing to “slack off.” Yet this liberatory narrative conceals users’ digital labor in boosting platform engagement. Ironically, despite its anti-work aesthetics, Rednote is notorious for overwork, with reported workweeks exceeding 58 hours, according to an industry estimate (Zhiji Duibiao, 2025).

Reset life in your cube

At your cube, search for anything on RedNote

solve your awkward problems

turn things around in minutes

Slack off for 5 minutes, recharge for 2 hours

If you can’t keep “involuting,” scroll RedNote to relax on your laptop

Body at desk, mind in outer space

As 2023 draws to a close, RedNote Desktop Version invites all workers to join in the campaign

“Resetting your life at the cube”

Figure 13: Rednote’s “Life-Resetting” Campaign

As Harvey (2000) argues, capitalism simultaneously commands productive bodies and fragilizes them. This turns social reproduction into a novel site of accumulation. If body-charging appears as conscious consumer choice, it activates Ahmed’s (2014, p. 110) thesis that a body “must be willing if not able, or willing to be able.” The charger metaphor commodifies the will to realign bodily rhythms with accelerating capitalist time: the less-able must become able again, the already-able must be abler than before. This culture forms a shapeless control that repaints politics inside out, as the air we breathe, the food we eat and the place we rest.

Like daily phone-charging, body-charging practices reveal a “circular quest for perfection” (Cederström and Spicer, 2015, p. 13), situating bodies in a renewable cycle of depletion, purchase, relief, and recurred depletion (Martínez, 2020). Body-charging services profit from this repeated expiration of short-lived relief. Capitalism, therefore, profits from labor power and the productivity deficits it cyclically presupposes, collapsing labor for consumption and consumption for labor. “Modern illnesses” are momentarily soothed but never structurally resolved by design.

This cyclical temporal culture of recuperative extraction displaces rather than resolves exhaustion. While corporate regimes deepen labor exploitation by outsourcing recovery to marketized self-care, workers within body-charging industries labor under irregular hours and precarious conditions. However, the body-charging industry primarily recognizes middle-class fragilities (Widerberg, 2006). As some laboring bodies are deemed more deserving than others, recuperative extraction legitimizes the stretching of laboring bodies beyond limits, while reproducing class distinctions. Hence, it deflects any structural critique by relocating fatigue onto a stratified fabric of labor through relentless economic exchange.

Conclusion

Based on Shenzhen's everyday media artefacts, this article examines how post-socialist temporalities are represented within China's tech hub. Official visions of the techno-future articulate a teleological path toward national perfection, renewed by the mnemonic device of "newness" and galvanized by a commodity culture that leverages technology, fetishizes acceleration, and commodifies fatigue.

Despite the deliberate ambiguity of the national future, this post-socialist grammar of future-making binds individual dreams to national goals, constructs the self through others, leverages newness through oldness, shapes the future through the present, and imagines the national future through harmonious human-nonhuman synthesis. This grammar rests on the mutual constitution of past, present, and future: the past is reinvented as belatedness, the present is selectively scanned for future-worthy elements, and the future offers cognitive and affective cues to guide the present.

The temporal order constructed through "newness" and techno-metaphors veils rather than resolves the post-socialist tensions between political control and market liberation, spiritual value and material reward, collective interest and individual desire. "Newness" flattens historically sedimented power differentials, while the costs of uneven development — inequality, exploitation, and exhaustion — are increasingly outsourced to commercialized solutions. The chip, lightning, and charger metaphors condense the temporal politics of Shenzhen's techno-futurism. They universalize techno-developmentalism while differentiating populations, extracting labor, and commodifying social reproduction. Thus, although post-socialist temporality appears as a refreshed present moving toward a perfect future, it absorbs heterogeneous, uneven, and diachronic temporalities remaining occluded from its representations: the messy time of physical labor, the cyclical time of bodily repair, and the stagnant time of economic recession.

As China retains its communist horizon while shifting from bypassing capitalist stages to adhering to historical progression, acceleration is intrinsic to post-socialist political economy. In organizing time, acceleration is a desirable political tempo, at once speculative and embodied. Its fetishization is registered across somatic movements, government performance, and market rhythms. Moreover, acceleration is not merely a means of reaching the future, but part of the future itself, where movement and innovation unfold at greater speeds than those of the present, with no resolution of existing social problems in sight.

The future is neither simply a state imagination projected ahead of time, nor merely a commodity peddled by the market. It must be made ordinary through language, image, music, video, or metaphor that guides people on how fast to move, which lifestyles to desire, and what costs must be

paid to become future-ready. In other words, the utopian future becomes effective only when it meets quotidian life.

Notes

[1] The photo on the left was taken by Jiang Shigao, retrieved from: http://www.sznews.com/news/content/2018-12/21/content_21296412.htm.

[2] Various compound forms with the character [閃]in Mandarin are found, such as 閃送、閃購、閃修、閃充、閃貸、閃付.

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