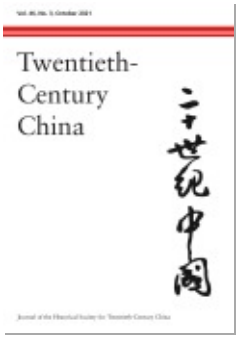
Unending Capitalism: How Consumerism Negated China's Communist Revolution by Karl Gerth (review)



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Karl Gerth. *Unending Capitalism: How Consumerism Negated China's Communist Revolution.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 384 pp. $79.99 (cloth), $24.99 (paper).

In the summer of 1979, Gurkha soldiers posted to the Hong Kong–China border reported their observations of the People's Republic of China (PRC): vehicular movement, weapons training, and operations against illegal emigration. Among the routine notes was an observation entitled, "Affluent Soldiers," and it was significant enough to merit a photo. From Hong Kong, the soldiers saw one Chinese frontier soldier wearing a watch, and on a subsequent day another soldier's watch was caught on camera.[1] The sporting of watches was noteworthy because of its seeming incongruence, a symbol of distinction in socialist China. In *Unending Capitalism*, Karl Gerth addresses this paradox by arguing that consumption was central to the policies of China's Communist Party (CCP).

In this wide-ranging and deeply researched book, Gerth invites readers to consider the history of the PRC from the point of view of individual and state consumption. The book completes a trilogy on consumer culture in the long twentieth century that begins with a 2004 study of consumer culture and nationalism in the Republican period and continues with a 2010 examination of the contemporary global influence of Chinese consumers.[2] Using archives and documentary collections as well as oral interviews and blogs, Gerth describes the political economy of the Mao era as a form of state capitalism rather than socialism, coining the term "state consumerism" to describe the ways in which officials encouraged individual consumption of goods and managed both private and public goods to serve the ends of the state (7). The narrative arc of the book thus traces state consumerism over time, while highlighting how such consumerism reinforced Mao-era inequalities.[3]

Unending Capitalism proceeds thematically and chronologically. Chapter 1 introduces the so-called "Three Greats" (wristwatch, bicycle, and sewing machine) as desired goods that differentiated their owners and begat more consumption, despite tensions with socialist asceticism. Chapter 2 traces state consumerism across the 1949 divide, examining two political campaigns—the Resist America–Aid Korea movement and the Three and Five Antis campaign—as ways in which the CCP intensified a pre-1949 drive toward state capitalism, the former a promotion of Chinese goods and the latter the appropriation of private capital. Chapter 3 tackles the ideological context of consumerism, showing how the Soviet idea of "building socialism" was adopted in China, enabling the rise of what Gerth terms "socialist" fashion and "socialistic" identity (82–83).

In chapter 4, Gerth analyzes both the advertising industry and the ads it produced, following the path of state consumerism as it channeled and spread consumption, though the state was never able to completely harness it (132). *Unending Capitalism*'s chapter 5 goes with the consumer into sites of consumption, analyzing the retail industry and

1 "Fu Tien (Futian) Battalion," August 1979, HKRS 908-1-76, Hong Kong Public Records Office, Hong Kong.

2 Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004); Karl Gerth, *As China Goes, So Goes the World: How Chinese Consumers Are Transforming Everything* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

3 See, for example, Andrew G. Walder, *China under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), esp. chap. 14.

"socialist commerce." Here Gerth argues that managing shopping was a way for the state to mobilize its "reserve army of consumers" (167) as well as to exploit the labor of its service workers, using campaigns rather than renumeration to compel better service and longer hours (156). The final two chapters conclude with the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), calling it "the apotheosis of self-expanding and compulsory consumerism during the Mao era" (228). Chapter 6 is a close reading of the Attack on the Four Olds campaign, suggesting that the very ransacking of houses released innumerable goods onto the secondhand market, "recirculat[ing] the bourgeois material culture that was repeatedly and explicitly targeted for destruction" (193). Chapter 7 expands on the previous chapter's treatment of a craze for military uniforms and analyzes the production, exchange, and circulation of Mao badges as emblematic of Mao-era consumption: the fad was enabled by the state but led to private production; it gave rise to an alternate form of exchange and encouraged consumerism; and it allowed individuals to express personal identities, from political loyalty to Mao to the social status of sporting a rare—and thus distinguishing—item.

Unending Capitalism meticulously documents the persistence of consumer culture in the Mao years and analyzes the many contradictions between socialist virtues and everyday practice. Its genealogy of "building socialism" roots our understanding of the Mao-era political economy in the state-led developmentalism of the Republican era and links it to the mixed economy of China's era of reform and opening up. In these ways, Gerth contributes to recent scholarship on the history of the PRC, which has demonstrated the complexity of "socialist transformation" as well as the official encouragement of practices sometimes labeled capitalist, like allowing families to plant private fields or individuals to conduct limited trade.[4] The book also contributes to established sociological research on the Mao era's rural-urban divide and its legacies, as well as interdisciplinary studies about fashion or even private connoisseurship, which have long debunked stereotypes of Chinese society as either unitary or uniform.[5] Finally, like Gerth, a new generation of historians is uncovering widespread and large-scale unofficial economic practices, from the top-down encouragement of smuggling to bottom-up cases of speculation.[6]

But do the existence of a spectrum of public and private (itself acknowledged by historical actors), the persistence (and even expansion) of consumerism and its attendant inequalities, and the phenomenon of underground capitalist practices negate, as Gerth argues in the book's very title, China's Communist revolution? To stress the diversity and

4 Dali Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change Since the Great Leap Famine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

5 On the legacies of inequality, see Walder, *China under Mao*. See also Martin King Whyte, *Myth of the Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010). On fashion, see Antonia Finnane and Peidong Sun, "Textiles and Apparel in the Mao Years: Uniformity, Variety and the Limits of Autarchy," in Wessie Ling and Simona Segre Reinach, eds., *Fashion in Multiple Chinas: Chinese Styles in the Transglobal Landscape* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 16–43. On private art connoisseurship, see Denise Y. Ho, "Reforming Connoisseurship: State and Collectors in Shanghai in the 1950s and 1960s," *Frontiers of History in China* 7, no. 4 (2012), 608–37.

6 On state encouragement of smuggling, see Philip Thai, *China's War on Smuggling: Law, Economic Life, and the Making of the Modern State, 1842–1965* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). See also Adam K. Frost, "Speculators and Profiteers: Entrepreneurship in Socialist China, 1957–1980" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2021).

unintended consequences of China's socialist experiment is the bread-and-butter of PRC history, but paradoxes do not a negation make. To challenge conventional definitions of "capitalism" and "socialism" is a useful exercise in marking what China's Communist revolution was, particularly how it was experienced at the grassroots. Yet the historian's duty is also to take seriously the claims of historical actors and how they grappled with the reality of contradictions.

The contributions of *Unending Capitalism* are twofold: Gerth's research reveals how and why consumerism persisted in Mao's China, and his argument opens a provocative debate over fundamental keywords in PRC history.[7] Though most will continue to use "socialism" to describe China in the Mao years, Gerth's intervention challenges the field to reflect on its definition and use the word with intention.

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7 "PRC History Roundtable," *PRC History Review* 5, no. 1 (October 2020), 1–25.