

CCS Commentaries

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The non-contradiction of contemporary China

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A common way of describing China in today's media is to claim that it is an "authoritarian, communist regime"; another frequent phrase is that it is "a thriving capitalist country, which is communist only in name". Common sense tells us that both of these statements cannot be true. Surely it is impossible to have a country which is at once highly centralized and committed to socialist principles while simultaneously embracing the free market? It may be one of these things pretending to be the other, but surely not both at the same time? If, however, we are to get a grasp on how the Chinese system works today, we need to embrace this contradiction and think of China as socialist and capitalist in the same instance.

An important aspect of China's Maoist period was the development of what was referred to as the "mass line" – the organizational and leadership structure of the party which permeated virtually every level of society from urban work units and agricultural communes to unions and youth organizations. Crucial to the functioning of this organizational form was the sustained dissemination of party propaganda promoting discipline and self-sacrifice. Thus, while the mass line was a top-down bureaucratic structure, it was not, in any stereotypical sense, cold and faceless; rather, it mobilized citizens through a highly emotive campaign in which selfless labour and correct ideological thinking served as a vehicle for striving toward socialist utopia.

On the cover of a June 2001 edition of *The Economist* magazine is a photograph of three young Chinese men, smoking, one with long, bleached blonde hair and another with a red Mohican. One of the young men wears a T-shirt with Mao Zedong on the front, another with a picture of Argentinean Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara. The cover caption, "As China Changes", suggests that the revolutionary zeal of the earlier socialist period has now been reduced to a fashion accessory, subordinate to the far more serious business of hedonistic consumption. Certainly, the ironic and sometimes humorous distancing from the old days of Marxist-Leninist stoicism is a prevalent theme within urban China today: I was once told by a man in Chengdu that the large statue of Mao in the city centre, with its fingers stretched out toward the masses, is the Great Helmsman's plea for citizens to drink five beers a day.

But to suggest that such anecdotal evidence supports the "socialism only in name" theory would be to only grasp half the picture. For the T-shirts that the young men are wearing and the cigarettes that they are smoking, come from highly organized assembly lines of laborers who work according to principles not that distant from those of the Mass Line some thirty years prior. The quasi-militarized organization of "the world's workshop", in which uniforms distinguish roles and ranks and where bathroom visits require permits, seems a world away from the Mickey Mouse and Barbie Dolls being assembled. And yet it is not merely the organizational principles of the earlier socialist period which persist within Chinese factories: there is also a continuity of the

affective dimension of socialism, in which employees express their allegiance to the factory collective through morning group exercises and transform themselves into higher quality workers through self-criticism sessions. David Davies has even written of a Chinese Walmart manager who actively draws on the works of Mao Zedong to positively motivate his employees. The logic of the socialist cell extends into the booming realm of middle and upper class gated communities, in which Romanesque and Mediterranean-themed villas are run by self-organized neighbourhood communities who keep a vigilant eye on the comings and goings of inhabitants.

The urge to understand Chinese society as either a capitalist one or a socialist one, but never both, is perhaps an impediment to grasping how the region functions today. If indeed “capitalism with Chinese characteristics” is a model unique to a particular revolutionary historical experience of the Chinese people, then what might it mean to transpose such a model to the developing world? Would it even make sense to do so, and if so, might it work better in countries with their own histories of African Socialism (say, Tanzania or Ethiopia’s Derg, with its brand of African Stalinism)? Whatever the case, when we think of new political and economic models attempting to describe China, we need to be able to think, at least by western (Cold War influenced) standards, in terms of analytical contradictions. But more importantly, we need to try and imagine it from the Chinese perspective, in which it is not a contradiction at all but simply the nature of contemporary reality. 