

Ralf Ruckus

The Communist Road to Capitalism: How Unrest and Containment Have Pushed China's (R)evolution since 1949

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China and Its Discontents

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China is 'the factory of the world', a major political powerhouse, takes the largest share of exports and imports of goods in Aotearoa New Zealand's economy, and has a growing influence in the South Pacific. And yet, many of us here know little about its social and political history, not to mention the internal dynamics of its political economy. In *The Communist Road to Capitalism*, Ralf Ruckus—who toured Aotearoa New Zealand in the early 2010s for a series of informative talks based on his visits to China—presents a careful, historically-situated, complex, and tight analysis of the evolution of Chinese society from the mid-twentieth century. Ruckus deploys a cyclical historical framework, drawn from the work of world-systems analyst Beverly Silver, to illustrate that China is not a 'harmonious society' as its rulers claim, but is, and has been, an inherently unstable country riven by deep class, gender, and rural/urban divisions and conflicts.¹

This book is not a glossy account of China. Ruckus outlines the widespread suffering and galling disruption to people's lives under the brutality of the Chinese regime since the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. This regime, Ruckus notes, has been exploitative and authoritarian, exemplified by events such as the 1958–61 famine, caused by the Great Leap Forward, in which an estimated 15 to 45 million tragically died; the deaths of half a million during

1 See Beverly Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

the ‘cleansing of class ranks’ campaign from 1968 to 1971, following the Cultural Revolution; and the redundancies of 50 million workers due to aggressive privatisation between 1993 and 2003.² Such brutality is illustrated today by the province of Xinjiang, which ‘serves as the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] leadership’s laboratory for repressive tools, including mass surveillance and detention, mostly of the province’s Uygur population’.³

Yet Ruckus goes beyond simplistic liberal denunciations of China as a one-party dictatorship. He argues that China has a sophisticated, dynamic, and complex regime that is often responsive to demands from below. The book refreshingly avoids a top-down narrative that focusses on key politicians like Mao or Xi Jinping, or on the battle of competing ideas within the party elite. Instead, Ruckus suggests that China’s development has been propelled by a dual phenomenon: from above, by the ruling class within the Communist Party, and from below, by major social movements and strike waves that have risen and fallen in opposition to policies and practices of parties. In response, the ruling class have sought to contain, repress, give concessions to, and/or co-opt these struggles. Each new transformation—whether it was collectivisation, industrialisation, or the transformation of state structures—created, sooner or later, new crises and eventually new outbreaks of social unrest. For example, the strikes and ‘open criticism’ of 1956–57 led to the tragic Great Leap Forward and purges; the Cultural Revolution of 1966–67 precipitated purges and the implementation of military rule; the Tian’anmen Square movement of 1989 engendered brutal repression, major economic restructuring, and the rise of China as a global capitalist power; and while the huge waves of migrant worker strikes in factories from 2003 to 2012 caused the end of ‘cheap’ labour, it also brought about further economic booms and the ‘Great Leap Outward’, as illustrated by the ‘One Belt One Road’ initiative—a global route of land and sea corridors ‘to connect the PRC

2 Ralph Ruckus, *The Communist Road to Capitalism: How Unrest and Containment Have Pushed China’s (R)evolution since 1949* (San Francisco: PM Press, 2021), n53; 68; 114.

3 Ruckus, *The Communist Road to Capitalism*, 176.

with countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America through a global trade and manufacturing infrastructure controlled by the CCP regime'.⁴

Certainly, many local and international factors have driven development in China beyond the entanglement of the dynamics of ruling class strategies and local social unrest.⁵ These factors include major transformations due to war and imperialist rivalries, the implementation of new technology, periodic booms and busts in local and global capitalism, and the global development of 'impersonal domination' under Chinese capitalism, such as the evolution of the commodity form and value, among other factors. However, Ruckus notes that China's 'opening' in the late 1970s, and its rapid industrialisation thereafter, was interlinked with de-industrialisation (or 'offshoring' of industry) and rise of neoliberalism in many high-income countries in the 1970s and 1980s, including Aotearoa New Zealand. This de-industrialisation itself was a reaction by capital in Australasia, North America, and Western Europe to large social movements and strike waves during the 1960s and 1970s, which, to some extent, squeezed profits, leading to capital flight and de-investment.⁶

Ruckus is not a class reductionist. He recognises that the Chinese regime was founded not only on class exploitation but also on the cultivation of a Maoist patriarchy where women performed the dual burden of reproducing labour power (predominantly, unpaid 'housework' and care work) and supplying wage labour. He claims that the low birth rate in China today is a form of women's resistance—a 'birth strike' against state policies to increase the population. Alongside gender divisions, the rural-urban rift is another

4 For the strike movement undertaken by largely migrant workers in China, see Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).

5 Most Marxists argue that capitalist crises are either caused by over-production and/or the tendency of the rate of profit to fall over time, although some acknowledge that social unrest can make some contribution to crises. For example, Michael Heinrich argues Marx's analysis sought to prove that crises would still occur independently of class struggle. Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012, 195.

6 Ruckus, *The Communist Road to Capitalism*, 115.

essential social division that has also led to major revolts.⁷ This division was codified by the CCP's infamous *hukou* household registration system of the late 1950s, which classified every Chinese person as being either agricultural or non-agricultural. Ruckus argues that this system created lasting divisions between relatively impoverished rural people and an urban population with better living conditions and access to state welfare. Rural people were then further discriminated against when they migrated en masse to the cities for factory work from the early 1980s onwards.

Ruckus' broad and useful analysis could have been supplemented by more discussion on how Chinese development has caused extensive environmental degradation and been somewhat based on the suppression and 'assimilation' of ethnic and indigenous minorities. Ruckus notes that these topics are outside the scope of his book, but pivotal to his understanding of China is how the CCP leadership exploited or created divisions in society. Thus, studying the implications of divisions between Han Chinese people and 'minorities' would have enriched and supplemented his analysis of the rural-urban divide. Yet, overall, Ruckus importantly recognises that the ever-recomposing Chinese working class was not homogenous and working-class activity was often ambivalent. Working-class activity pressurised the ruling class for reforms, but it could also preserve privileges by 'boundary drawing' within the working class, such as between rural and urban workers, and between female migrant workers and others.

My main criticism, however, is that the book is overly schematic due to its concern with categorising Chinese history into different periods. Indeed, the book's most controversial analysis is its contribution to the perennial leftist debate about whether China is, or was, socialist or capitalist since the

7 Ruckus acknowledges major ethnic divisions, but only very briefly. Ruckus, *The Communist Road to Capitalism*, n12.

CCP gained power in 1949.⁸ This discussion may seem esoteric, and might simply depend on how people define the contested term socialism, but it is nonetheless important to mull over for several reasons. Firstly, many people think that socialism, if not leftism in general, simply means a bureaucratic, barbaric police state, extreme centralised control by the government and political parties, and the deepening of mass exploitation and inequality. Secondly, China's influence is growing globally, and today, it claims to be socialist with Chinese characteristics. Finally, interrelated to the latter point, a minority of radicals today are drawn towards China because they view it as a concrete example of 'actually existing socialism', and see anti-imperialist and liberatory potential in China (although Maoism today in high-income countries has a tiny following compared to its heyday in the 1970s).

Ruckus, for his part, argues against those who equate socialism with state ownership, extensive state welfare, and centralised one-party rule. He suggests that the CCP did not create an egalitarian and communist society free from exploitation and repression, but instead replicated class rule. But even here, Ruckus argues against left communists, anarchists, and unorthodox Trotskyists who think China had always been capitalist since 1949. These socialists generally assert it was 'state capitalist' because class relations, money, and surplus extraction were retained alongside strong

8 A similar debate also occurred in high-income countries over whether the USSR was capitalist or socialist. See, for example, Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and The Soviet Union: A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates since 1917* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2009). For a sympathetic perspective on the Chinese regime, which argues that it extends socialism through its 'socialist market economy', see John Ross, *China's Great Road* (Glasgow: Praxis Press, 2021). For other perspectives, see Joel Andreas, *Disenfranchised: The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2019); Eli Friedman, *Insurgency Trap: Labor politics in Postsocialist China* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2014); Richard Smith, *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse* (London: Pluto Press, 2020); Isabella Weber, *How China Escaped Shock Therapy: The Market Reform Debate* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

state control and clampdowns on dissent.⁹ Against this viewpoint, Ruckus partially adopts a more orthodox Trotskyist and dissident Maoist view that a kind of state socialism—a ‘deformed’ and limited state socialism in which a socialist ruling class ruled over the rest of society—existed in China up to about the mid to late 1970s. After this point in time, China became capitalist following the death of Mao and the ‘opening up’ reforms of Deng Xiaoping and others.¹⁰ Ruckus modifies this analysis to include transitional periods between socialism and capitalism, and between feudalism and socialism in the 1950s.

I’m unconvinced by Ruckus’ analysis here. Admittedly, there is a continuum between socialism and capitalism—and many mixtures of the two, such as in market socialism—and it is certainly possible that China was state-socialist. Yet Ruckus’ view that China was state-socialist before the late 1970s appears to contradict his own analysis. For instance, he observes a lasting continuity across both socialist and capitalist phases in that both periods were characterised by ‘CCP rule + authoritarian state + surplus extraction + labour hierarchy + rural/urban divide + migration regime + patriarchal order’.¹¹ And developments that have been visible since the 1990s—such as class exploitation, the extraction of surplus value, appropriation of profits by the recomposed ruling class within the state and private sector—have seemingly also been present since 1949 in different forms and intensities. Ruckus goes on to argue that the state-capitalist perspective is ahistorical because it glosses over differences between the

9 The state capitalist perspective was developed by various left communists and council communists, such as Cajo Brendel and Paul Mattick, as well as Trotskyists from the Tony Cliff tradition (as represented by parties like the International Socialist Organisation in Aotearoa New Zealand). See Cajo Brendel, *Theses on the Chinese Revolution* (London: Solidarity, 1974); Paul Mattick, *Marx and Keynes: The Limits of the Mixed Economy* (London, Merlin Press, 1980). For an analysis of China from the Cliffite tradition, see, for example, Chris Harman, *A People’s History of the World* (London and New York: Verso, 2017).

10 This perspective is also shared by others—see for example, Friedman, *Insurgency Trap*. Smith argues that China was neither state-capitalist nor state-socialist, but instead was a ‘bureaucratic collectivist’/capitalist hybrid. See Smith, *China’s Engine of Environmental Collapse*.

11 Ruckus, *The Communist Road to Capitalism*, 167.

system of socialism before 1978 and capitalism thereafter. He contends that the major gulf between the two systems was the use of socialist state planning, state-planned allocation of labour, and the specific role of the CCP in moulding social relations in the socialist era. Yet, once again, haven't these developments also been present since 1978? What is more, state capitalism seems more than compatible with state planning and control through a nominally communist party. Indeed, it requires such planning and top-down management. State capitalism is also able to morph over time in response to social struggles and capitalist global developments. As Ruckus himself outlines, since 1978 the Chinese regime has transformed China with its 'opening up' to foreign investment, the privatisation of many state-owned industries, the development of a large state-managed market, the rise of mass consumption and production, and the development of a private sector. To me, these developments suggest a far less state-controlled capitalism than previously, but with the CCP still guiding from the helm (indeed, land, natural resources, and most means of production are still owned by that Party's ruling class).

Ruckus optimistically argues China today has potential for vast social unrest, buoyed perhaps by the largely pre-covid global wave of mass struggles in 2019–2020, in Chile, Lebanon, Iraq, France, Hong Kong, and USA, which were all defeated and have now long passed, especially given the accelerated rise of dictatorships, militarism, and the populist right globally in the ensuing years. Ruckus' optimistic claim is due to many factors, including how the regime has dropped its previous policy of 'flexible authoritarianism' to become more rigid and centralised. He contends that leftists today ought to draw lessons from the mistakes of China and hence reject traditional authoritarian socialism, hierarchy, and the 'party-fetish', which asserts that the organised left is the main driving force of history rather than movements from below. Instead, Ruckus suggests, social movements need to be grassroots-based, transnational, anti-capitalist, ecologically sustainable, anti-racist, oppose gender discrimination, and reject Western representative democracy. However, these anarchistic and anti-state communist perspectives seem tacked on at the end, rather than

helping to frame the book's analysis.

Overall as an 'independent left-wing activist and researcher', Ruckus has done a splendid job in summarising an amazingly complex and diverse history. He offers an important interpretation of social divisions and conflicts within China, and how these have contributed to the rise of China on the global stage. His grounded research is more thorough than most academics, and summarises a vast literature from Chinese, English, and German sources. *The Communist Road to Capitalism* has since been supplemented by Ruckus' recent publication *The Left in China*, which examines the left and leftist social movements in China since 1949.¹² Rather than arguing, as some leftists do, that because elites in high-income countries like Aotearoa New Zealand denigrate the Chinese regime for imperialist reasons and thus suggest that we ought to support China in its struggle against US imperialism, Ruckus instead maintains that we need anti-capitalist global solidarity that opposes any nationalism and imperialism, while also supporting grassroots social struggles within China and elsewhere. As he writes, 'this book has focussed on the trajectory of the PRC [People's Republic of China], yet any debate about revolution must address the making and composition of a global working class'.¹³ If we are to build such a global working class, understanding the dynamics of Chinese society will be essential to that project.

12 Ralf Ruckus, *The Left in China: A Political Cartography* (London: Pluto Press, 2023).

13 Ruckus, *The Communist Road to Capitalism*, 193. Ruckus also makes an appeal for building grassroots international workers' solidarity within and outside China, such as through the gongchao.org website.