

Felix Wemheuer: A Social History of Maoist China: Conflict and Change, 1949–1976, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 331 pp.

Reviewed by
Jan Zofka, Leipzig

Writing a social history of Maoist China is a large undertaking. Owing to the book's clear focus, Felix Wemheuer manages to tackle this task in a concise 300-page format, and readers who are interested in twentieth-century Chinese society and in the functioning of state socialism on the social level will without a doubt benefit from *A Social History of Maoist China: Conflict and Change, 1949–1976*. The book questions common understandings of the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). For example, it nuances the image of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) total control of society by drawing attention to everyday resistance and cooperation, as well as to local or regional differences. The story told by the book is one of rapid social change and upheaval and of the conflict between a claim for control from above and the popular reactions to it. It departs from a leadership-centred political history, but at the same time the author emphasizes that it is not meant to be a micro-history. He proposes a multilevel approach, as there is "no necessary contradiction between micro-history [...] and the study of the 'commanding heights' of the party-state" (p. 13).

Wemheuer identifies three key dimensions (p. 6) to be tackled: social change, classification, and conflict. The author looks at classification from two sides. On the one hand, there are political decisions of party and government organs to categorize the population in terms of class status, gender, ethnicity, and rural-urban divide. On the other hand, there are social practices of implementing these categories on the ground. Classifications had a great impact on normal people's lives because access to career opportunities, food rations, or residence permits in cities depended on the individual's status.

Large-scale social change was the backdrop to these classification policies. The completely poor, war-torn country of 550 million inhabitants with a predominantly agricultural economy in 1949 turned into a semi-industrialized country with 937 million inhabitants and massively improved elementary education and public health services by 1976 (p. 256–265). These structural changes laid "the groundwork for the economic transition of the following decades" (p. 258) but came along with massive cruelties. Next to the great famine entangled with the Great Leap Forward campaign and the devastation of the Cultural Revolution, the leadership used the people as a flexible reservoir of workers to be shifted from one place to another. Among other factors, it was the classification system that enabled the PRC leadership to mobilize rural dwellers for urban factories and send intellectuals and urban youth to work in rural areas.

One of the book's most illustrative examples of these high-handed decisions was those taken in the early 1960s. When the CCP leadership realized that it had erred

in its Great Leap Forward campaign as the resulting economic devastation became clear, the party leaders decided to send 26 million workers back to the countryside (p. 165). This measure was part of a more general turn to moderate the economic course and renounce rapid industrialization in the early 1960s, but it was taken in the same arbitrary mode as the one for the radical acceleration under the slogan of the Great Leap Forward.

These shifts between radicalization and moderation – and the rupture of millions of individual lives connected to them – were very typical for Maoist China, as the author states (p. 178). The speed and amount of these shifts between radical campaigns and readjustments make them hard to grasp, and at this point it may have been preferable to set aside the chronological approach that frames the whole book. Some readers might get a bit lost between “Clean Ups”, “High Tides”, “Black Winds” and the readjustments promoted by different leadership figures to each of these campaigns. A more synthesizing account may have proven more fruitful here, one that concentrates on what these constant campaigns, mobilization, changes, and leadership struggles mean for an overall interpretation of the CCP’s relation with society. Still, the book makes clear that, at least partly, the to and fro of these campaign-style changes different factions in the leadership and their struggles over industrialization concepts.

Going beyond these leadership struggles, Wemheuer also traces popular and local responses to campaigns and policy changes, which leads to very intriguing insights. For example, the book perceives the Cultural Revolution as a complicated entanglement

of factional strife, party-state breakdown, low-intensity civil warfare, military regime, and social protest movements, instead of reducing it to a mobilization from above by Mao Zedong. Local and regional party committees broke down, and rebel groups mobilized under the flag of Maoism: the “temporary breakdown of provincial and local party organizations gave rebel groups considerable latitude, making top-down implementation of policies from Beijing next to impossible in many cases” (p. 225). A very illustrative example for social demands in the Cultural Revolution presented by the book is the mobilization of temporary workers who organized themselves into the General Rebel Regiment of the Red Laborers and demanded an end to temporary contracts and integration into the permanent workforce. They persuaded the Ministry of Labour and the official trade union federation to join a “common announcement” supporting the abolition of temporary work, but the central authorities, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council, worried about the costs of making all contract workers permanent. They declared the announcement non-valid, and the General Rebel Regiment was dissolved. Later decisions integrated many temporary workers into the permanent workforce, thus meeting a part of the workers’ demands, but temporary work remained an important tool for the decision-makers to realize their economic programme (pp. 217–218).

The book’s accounts of social upheaval are inspiring for comparisons with other socialisms during the Cold War: nothing similar ever happened in the Eastern European socialist states. Soviet bloc countries found themselves on a “treadmill of reforms”[1]

as well, but no breakdown of local party committees or civil war–like strife between the Red Guards and the bureaucrats ever happened. Was Chinese socialism a completely different system? Such comparisons may be one way to go beyond the national framing of a social history of socialism.

From a transregional and global history perspective, one may ask more generally if a social history of state socialism beyond the national level is (im)possible. The outside world does appear in the book: many of the ideas behind and some of the concrete concepts of classification were taken from or influenced by the Soviet example. Regarding the “New democracy” and its end in 1953, the author mentions the possibility that the Chinese development was influenced by a broader dynamic in the Soviet bloc and even earlier in the international communist movement (p. 55). General lines of the PRC’s nationality policy, all differences notwithstanding, were derived from the Soviet model of multiethnicity, including an “invisible”, unmarked norm (of Russianness in the Soviet case and of the Han in the Chinese case). There are hints in the book at early PRC engineers who had been educated in the USA, but one may also ask about the social impact of the Soviet and Eastern European specialists in China and the Chinese going abroad to study in Moscow to learn as interns in Leuna or to supervise the construction of factories in Southeast Asia or North Korea. Maybe the number of passports for travelling abroad was negligible (p. 39); however, cross-border mobility could be another marker for social distinction, and the impact may be larger than what the limited numbers of travelling people can tell.

Thus, the book has the potential to lay the groundwork for a future transnational social history of state socialism. In this undertaking, the separated area studies of Eastern Europe and East Asia/China have to come together, and Wemheuer certainly has already earned a large degree of merit in that sense.[2] Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go in writing a global history of state socialism, and Wemheuer’s social history of China under Mao is a must-read in this undertaking, not least for scholars of the Soviet bloc who want to get a more global picture of what Cold War state socialism was.

Notes:

- 1 G. E. Schroeder, *The Soviet economy on a treadmill of reforms*, in: *Soviet Economy in a Time of Change*, ed. by US Congress, Joint Economic Committee, Washington, DC, 1979, pp. 312–340.
- 2 See, for example, F. Wemheuer (ed.): *Machterhalt durch Wirtschaftsreformen. Chinas Einfluss auf die sozialistische Welt* (= *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung*), Berlin 2020.

B. M. Jain: *The Geopsychology of International Relations in the 21st Century: Escaping the Ignorance Trap*, Lanham et al.: Lexington Books, 2021, 249 S.

Reviewed by
Hartmut Elsenhans, Leipzig

This book is a summary of the scientific work of B. M. Jain, an eminent scholar