



# China's breed of consumer socialism grows even stranger

BY MARK WILLIAMS

**In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture**

By Geremie R. Barmé

512 pages, \$30

Columbia University Press

**I**N 1991, when the Communist Party of China released its anthology of revolutionary hits—*Everybody Sing Along: China Karaoke Song Treasury*—Geremie R. Barmé reports in his book *In the Red*, one Beijing music store advertised, “Buy a karaoke cassette of ‘Sing a Song for the Party’ and we’ll give you a picture of Chairman Mao for free.” By 1995, after the commodification of Party culture had openly become a two-way street, a Chinese insecticide company was using “Away with all pests!” as its slogan, quoting from one of the Great Helmsman’s anti-imperialist poems. And a television commercial touted vacuum cleaners with a voice-over reminding viewers that “dust won’t disappear of its own accord”—Mao’s metaphor for what to do about reactionaries.

What on earth are the Chinese doing?

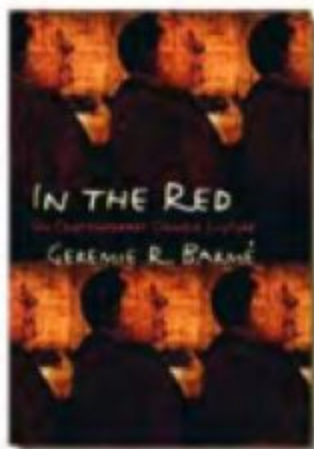
## TUNNEL REVISION

Mr. Barmé, a fellow at the Australian National University’s Institute of Advanced Studies, is as qualified as any-

one to explain. In the mid-’70s, after majoring in Chinese, Buddhist studies, and Chinese art history in Australia (and staggering “under the weight of residual hippydom and Eastern mysticism”), he attended universities in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenyang, China. Following the fall of the “Gang of Four” in October 1976, Mr. Barmé reports, he and the other students were told to black out in their textbooks all jargon pertaining to the deposed junta. Eventually “the delirium of rewriting history became so excessive that we were instructed to hand in the texts for pulping.”

Classified as an “anarchic bourgeois element,” Mr. Barmé left the mainland and moved to Hong Kong. Passing as a university graduate who’d followed the Party’s dogmas and understood mainland doings, he wrote regular

columns in Chinese for one of the colony’s daily newspapers. As his Chinese writings expanded, Mr. Barmé earned the enmity of various figures; one mainland conservative called him a CIA agent. After the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, his criticisms of both official culture and alternative art earned him police surveillance and harassment during his mainland trips. His academic writings—such as an analysis of Chinese attitudes titled “To Screw Foreigners Is

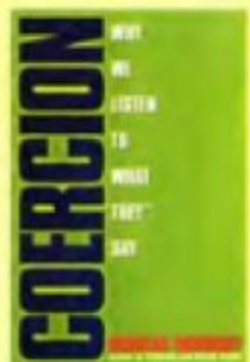


## SHELF LIFE

Previously convinced that information technology would set us free, Douglas Rushkoff, the author of *Cyberia* and *Media Virus*, was once one of the most enthusiastic cheerleaders of the digital revolution. But as he admits in his new book, *Coercion: Why We Listen to What They Say* (Riverhead Books, \$25), he may have jumped the gun—marketers and businessmen have coöpted the revolution he envisioned. Though *Coercion* is at times simplistic, the unmistakable message is this: We have surrendered control over much of our lives to a capitalism that is far beyond any-

one’s control.

Citing numerous examples from everyday life—car salespeople’s techniques, scripted professional sporting events, the In-



ternet’s commercialization, spin-doctored politicians—Mr. Rushkoff charts a hidden world of mass marketing that has become obsessed with doing whatever it takes to manage, predict, and mold consumer behavior.

He makes many of the same points about programmed consumption and media manipulation outlined in the ’70s by media theorists like Jean Baudrillard, but Mr. Rushkoff’s status as a new-media authority will likely bring some much-deserved attention to the downside of the dramatic societal upheavals inspired by technology.

—Peter Rojas

The U.S. economy may be the second most competitive in the world, according to the World Economic Forum (see Rankings, page 38), but Eamonn Fingleton—whose Web site, [www.fingleton.net](http://www.fingleton.net), is titled “The Home of the Contrarian”—thinks it’s headed for trouble. The problem, as the former *Financial Times* editor



Patriotic"—also offended colleagues. Mr. Barmé claims that his years of experience have effectively immersed him in the subtleties of "the language of totalitarianism." He writes that "when denounced for one's 'whitey,' *laowai*, bourgeois sympathies and Western mind-set, I always feel myself to be in a familiar linguistic universe."

According to Mr. Barmé, in China everyone, from the artists to the second-generation technocrats who have replaced the Party's original hard-liners, communicates "between the lines." Self-repression itself has become a highly evolved performance art, Mr. Barmé says, quoting from the Hungarian poet-sociologist Miklós Haraszti's book *The Velvet Prison*: "The technique of writing between the lines is, for us, identical with artistic technique...a test of our professionalism."

If the various factions involved share an understanding that prohibited views might prove to be merely *premature*—that is, potentially acceptable under the state's next reformulation of the social consensus—such views may be tolerated, and all manner of negotiations can become possible. Mr. Barmé writes: "To witness famous critics of the Party reach accommodations with the authorities in private while putting on the brave face of the dissident to foreign journalists and scholars was...educational."

### THE WILD, WILD EAST

The Chinese have the longest history of any people. This fact, coupled with the ambiguities inherent in their developing experiment with consumer socialism, has made it difficult for outsiders to understand mainland China.

Consider one example out of the many given in Mr. Barmé's survey. Among China's recent crop of writers is Wang Shuo, who, with satires like *Please Don't Treat Me Like a Human*, might at

first sound like the spokesman for Gen X slackers in the People's Republic. But that's an oversimplification, Mr. Barmé says. To be a slacker in a culture of purges and labor camps, one must be supremely determined.

Then there's the Chinese historical element. Mr. Wang's fiction reflects the subculture of the *liumang*, an untranslatable term containing such negative connotations as "loafer," "hoodlum," "punk," and "molester of females," as well as positive ones pertaining to wandering warriors and knights-errant (kung fu heroes are another manifestation of this tradition). So Chinese intellectuals can claim that Mr. Wang, being a representative of today's *liumang* (and who wears mirror shades as he prowls Beijing's inner-city streets on his Flying Pigeon bicycle), is an heir of

"the wanton literati of the Wei-Jin period...the totally uninhibited Sages of the Bamboo Grove (third century A.D.)."

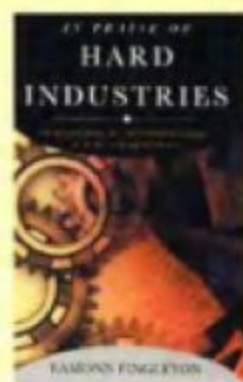
One doesn't have to think this kind of stuff is cool to see that China abounds in subtleties and ironies. Indeed, Mr. Barmé writes that while the mainland Chinese envy Taiwan's affluence and cosmopolitan status, they consider the island's inhabitants naïfs: the Taiwanese haven't experienced the "decades of militant Communism and political infighting [that] have forced nearly everyone on the mainland into a pact with the devil."

If Mr. Barmé is correct, it's not only pride in a 5,000-year-old culture that makes some Chinese believe that Westerners can't understand them. He thinks China still feels deep anxiety over its present material backwardness, military weakness, and political inadequacy—the latter arising partly out of individuals' shame at the compromises inherent in living under decades of Party rule. *In the Red* quotes one young Beijing software black-marketeer, who explains at aggressive

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outlines it in his new book, *In Praise of Hard Industries: Why Manufacturing, Not the Information Economy, Is the Key to Future Prosperity* (Houghton Mifflin, \$26), is that the United States is far too complacent about the growth prospects of "postindustrial" products and services like telecommunications, software, the Internet, financial services, and law. As a result, the country has abandoned its historical leadership in advanced manufacturing and has transferred some of its most precious production know-how to foreign subsidiaries.

Mr. Fingleton's argument against the new economy is based on three principles: it offers a bad (read: elitist) job mix, it has resulted in slow income growth (as measured per capita vs. gross domestic product), and it reduces exports (software and services don't cross borders easily). "As the world's developing nations bootstrap themselves out of poverty, how will they spend their money?" he asks. "Wall Street's latest portfolio hedging




services, personal home-page software? Probably not." But he isn't advocating a return to simple assembly-line manufacturing. The "hard industries" of the

book's title mean the capital-intensive production of items like LCD screens, camera lenses, and semiconductors—to name a few of the areas where the United States now lags far behind Japan, Germany, and other countries.

Mr. Fingleton makes a fairly convincing case for why U.S. policy makers should consider adopting his action plan—every element of which entails more government regulation. Or we could wait and see where in the competitiveness rankings the United States falls in five years. 🍀

—Bonnie Azab Powell





length how the Chinese were the first to discover electricity, magnetic fields, and—in the theory of yin-yang—the binary notation necessary for computing. “These fucking foreigners simply can’t face up to the fact that they owe us for copyright infringement.... Now they’ve just managed to move ahead of us a little, and they won’t let us have a fair go.... Well, I’m going to go right on copying whatever comes my way.”

### MAO AND THEN

In this context—and after the unrest of 1989 and the demise of the Soviet Union—the generation that rose to power in the Party in the '90s was prepared to accept market consumerism as a necessary evil in order for the Chinese people to remake themselves. Party technocrats thus commenced a public relations blitzkrieg. Using Chinese rock and roll, soap operas, books, comics, films, and karaoke, the Party's heroes and ideas were merchandised to the comrade in the street; newspaper competitions and

televized game shows tested participants' skill in memorizing Party trivia. President Jiang Zemin even urged his politburo to study James Cameron's *Titanic* for its effectiveness in dramatizing love across class lines. Consequently, Chinese commentators have noted the “graying” of society, as if the Communist values by which the Party justifies its rule and the actual attitudes engendered by its market reforms had gone into a blender, resulting in an amalgam that is thoroughly equivocal.

Even by Chinese standards, new levels of ambiguity have been attained—as with the advertisements for insecticides and vacuum cleaners that coöpt Mao's words. Overall, Mr. Barmé reckons, “work on the Chinese velvet prison continued apace in the '90s, and the long-term prognosis was good.” Amer-

**In a culture of purges and labor camps, a slacker must be supremely determined.**

ica's idea that markets inevitably portend the imminence of American-style representative democracy is, he thinks, just about as naïve as the Party's leaders would like to believe they are. Nevertheless, with the horrors of the Mao years receding and Chinese economic well-being increasing, he does see signs of a more humanistic society emerging.

A final note: Mr. Barmé is a scholar, and *In the Red*, for all its considerable interest, is written in a style that some *Red Herring* readers might find too academic. Still, Mr. Barmé is an Australian scholar—his rejoinder (part of the book's appendix) to his mainland critics and their advocacy of “Asian values” is titled “Screw You, Too.” 🍷

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