

Book Review: China in global capitalism

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Review of *China in Global Capitalism: Building International Solidarity against Imperial Rivalry* by Eli Friedman, Kevin Lin, Rosa Liu et Ashley Smith. Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2024, 224 pages, 13,17 dollars.

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Introduction

Competition between the United States and China casts a shadow across the face of the entire globe. Over the past few years, rivalry between the two powers has broken out into open and sustained economic warfare. The US and its allies are blocking China's access to critical technologies, especially silicon chips, while China strains to climb the value chain and maintain its global manufacturing dominance.

Moments of heightened tension foreshadow the much greater dangers to come: Nancy Pelosi's inflammatory high-profile visit to Taiwan in 2022, China's aggressive military exercises around the island in response, the Chinese spy balloon scandal of early 2023. These were followed by calmer periods of patched-up relations, with commitments to greater trade and "cooperation". But the trajectory moves inexorably back towards confrontation.

US-China tensions represent the most dangerous dynamic of twenty-first century capitalism: the drive to war between huge economic and military - indeed, nuclear - powers. It is therefore urgent that anti-capitalists correctly understand this rivalry, and stand on the right side against it.

China in Global Capitalism: Building International Solidarity against Imperial Rivalry is a useful new book that will help radicals do both these things. Alongside an informative analysis of contemporary Chinese capitalism, imperialism and US-China rivalry, authors Eli Friedman, Kevin Lin, Rosa Liu and Ashley Smith offer a strong defence of genuine, consistent anti-imperialism. Their argument is clear: socialists everywhere must implacably oppose both the American and Chinese ruling classes, and fight for solidarity between the working classes and oppressed people of all countries.

The authors criticise three wrong positions in the West with respect to the US-China rivalry. The most widespread, common among social-democrats and liberal progressives, is to side with the liberal-democratic West against authoritarian dictatorships in China, Russia and Iran. This works as hypocritical, sweet-sounding cover for the crimes of history's bloodiest power: US imperialism.

The second position is what the authors call “unidimensional anti-imperialism”. This rightly opposes Western imperialism, but to the exclusion of all others. The crimes and imperialist interests of China or Russia are downplayed or ignored, as they are “not the main enemy”. Some even view these regimes as an “anti-imperialist” check on the US empire. At best, this muddies our solidarity with people in Ukraine, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, etc. At worst, it completely discredits the left in the eyes of people struggling under and against these regimes.

A third tendency goes much further, heaping glowing praise on the Chinese Communist Party. For them, China is already socialist or well on its way. This position, of a small but potentially growing number of Western Stalinists and Maoists, overlaps with the extreme nationalist Chinese diaspora such as the Qiao Collective who champion imperialist expansion (or as they call it, “re-unification”).

In each of these positions, the working class is entirely written out of the picture. The authors argue that “all three groups are united by their enthrallment to state power. If the state is seen as the only actor capable of exercising agency, we are left with the bleak choice of picking one side of the capitalist rivalry: Washington or Beijing” (p.5).

China in Global Capitalism serves as a general education on China so that genuine leftists can rebut these viewpoints. Part one argues conclusively that China is a completely capitalist society and a major imperialist power. Part two explores the internal dynamics of class-divided China, focusing on the struggles of workers, oppressed nationalities and women. Parts three and four deal, respectively, with the development and character of the US-China imperialist rivalry, and the possibilities for building international solidarity from below.

China is capitalist and imperialist

China is a thoroughly capitalist society. This fact is still disputed in small pockets of the left, from the respected Marxist economist Michael Roberts¹ to the US Stalinist organisation the Party for Socialism and Liberation.

The book’s authors point to the endless features of capitalism at work in China. The wealth of China’s economy presents itself, in the words of Marx, as an “immense accumulation of commodities”. China has its own tech giants, housing bubbles and private health providers. Hundreds of millions of Chinese workers produce goods for global markets, domestic purchase and advances in machinery. Their labour is exploited by a ruling class of fabulously rich state bureaucrats and private capitalists. Internal migration is controlled through the draconian *hukou* registration system, to maintain a pliable and mobile workforce with no real rights and protections.

Those who claim China is non-capitalist point to the strong, interventionist role played by its state in the economy. State ownership, however, is perfectly compatible with capitalist production. Indeed, states are indispensable for ensuring the smooth functioning of private industry, its overall profitability, and meeting the strategic interests of the ruling class as a whole. Most countries have experienced levels of state intervention equivalent to or exceeding modern day China: for example, wartime United States, postwar Europe, or 1980s anti-communist Taiwan.

The question is not whether the state intervenes in the economy, but to what – and to whose – end. “If bureaucrats and capitalists control the state, use it to make profit, and competition is its underlying logic, it remains capitalist...today, bureaucratic capitalists in China control the state and use its ownership and control over SOEs [state-owned enterprises] to enhance the global competitiveness of its national economy and corporations” (p.20).

China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) may not be strictly for-profit ventures, but they play an important role in powering many of China's private industries, and its global infrastructure projects in Africa, Latin America and Central Asia. Workers in SOEs are subject to the same capitalist despotism of speed-ups, wage cuts and layoffs, while the bureaucrats who run them are handsomely rewarded.

Political leaders in the Chinese state are capitalists in their own right, using political power to enrich themselves and private wealth to access political power. The wealthiest 153 members of China's central government bodies - the National People's Congress and the Political Consultative Congress - had an estimated combined wealth of US\$650 billion in 2018.²

China's state apparatus also plays the same role of any other capitalist state, using naked force and repression to serve capital against labour. Police and government-controlled unions operate together to suppress strikes and arrest worker leaders. In the landmark 2014 strike at the Yue Yuen shoe factory, Chinese riot police came to the aid of the Taiwanese factory-owners against 40,000 workers.

China is not only a capitalist society, but an imperialist power. By tracing China's accelerating integration into global capitalism from the 1990s onwards, the authors explain the true conflict between the US and China. Rather than an ideological clash between socialism and capitalism, or democracy and authoritarianism, it is about China's meteoric economic rise. China's new, indispensable position in world trade and production threatens the US and its allies' dominance in East Asia. "Rivalry with the US is fundamentally, if not exclusively, a struggle over control of natural resources, technologies, markets, intellectual property - in short, the essential ingredients for ensuring competitive advantage, profitability and power within global capitalism" (p.25).

For the first few decades of boom, the Chinese ruling class had a cautious foreign policy, focusing on attracting investment and making money. It was entirely dependent on foreign investment, its economy still paled in comparison to the West, and its military even more so.

However, by the time current president Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, China was a different beast. Foreign investment as a proportion of GDP had passed its peak, and China's huge demand for raw commodities kept much of the global economy afloat through the GFC. The focus shifted to building up domestic consumption and investment, and increasing geopolitical weight. Xi's vision to achieve the "Chinese dream" of Great Power status represented the new ambitions for growth and expansion of the Chinese ruling class. This has necessarily brought China into more open conflict with the US.

The plan to become a Great Power has been multifaceted. The One Belt, One Road initiative aims to export capital and deepen investment ties with the Global South. The strengthening of the top Communist Party leadership and anti-corruption drive are intended to centralise decision-making across the vast country.

But in order to turn economic power into true hegemony in Asia, the Chinese ruling class needs a first-rate military. A large naval fleet and expanded nuclear arsenal are core planks in China's plan to break out from America's containment strategy in the Asia Pacific.

Advanced weaponry requires a cutting-edge high-tech sector: constant developments in AI, quantum computing, and most fundamentally, a reliable domestic base for silicon chip production. The Communist Party has been driving up the exploitation of Chinese workers to achieve this as rapidly as possible. Turning manufacturing power into technological power into military power is textbook, modern-day imperialism.

The leadership under Xi is ambitious, but victory is by no means assured. The recent economic slowdown exposes the fragilities in China's imperialist ascendancy. The Belt and Road Initiative has bitten off far more than it can chew: projects and investment funds have slowed as Chinese companies face major delays, construction flaws, corruption and debt concerns, and poor planning. Project funding in Southeast Asia is currently falling short by US\$50bn.³ Other hurdles to taking on the US include "increased indebtedness; overcapacity; ineffectual investment; corruption; an ageing, shrinking and increasingly expensive workforce" (p.43).

The one fault with the analysis in these chapters is the ambiguous suggestion that China was non-capitalist during the Mao era (1949-78). The authors are divided on this question: some think Maoism was state capitalism, but others, as expressed in the book, argue that "China's road to capitalism" (p.11) came through the 1980s market reforms of Deng Xiaoping.

The transition from Mao to Deng, however, was from one form of capitalism to another. This explains the earlier regime's obsessive development of the nuclear bomb, with zero regard for the peasants and workers who were sweated and starved. Oppression of national groups also occurred under Mao, as the book points out later (pp.80, 83). These were characteristic of a bureaucratic capitalist class caught in global military competition - albeit starting from an extremely low productive base.

Against a certain left tendency inside and outside China to see Mao as an egalitarian alternative to today's billionaire-communists, it is important to set the record straight.

Struggles in China

The transformative rise of China at breakneck speed has produced enormous social contradictions. *China In Global Capitalism* explores the class, gender and national faultlines of a rising China.

Mainstream discussion of China has little or nothing to say about the potential of internal resistance. So this book, which describes class struggle in the countryside, cities and workplaces, is a refreshing antidote.

The rural struggle in contemporary China is often overlooked. People in the countryside rarely fight to maintain the ancient ways of agrarian life. Instead, their grievances concern the little or no compensation they receive when land is sold out from under them by profit-seeking local bureaucrats. Some resistance has reached surprising heights. The 2011 Wukan uprising, for example, involved years of campaigning, and villagers in demonstrations fighting riot cops. Eventually, government officials were chased out of Wukan. Locals won better compensation for the sale of their land and even, temporarily, the right to elect the village leadership.

Far more consequential, however, is the struggle of the working class. The book does not recount the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising, which involved millions of state-sector workers, but there are other books with the space to do it justice.⁴ After the ruthless crushing of Tiananmen Square, state-sector workers took part in desperate rearguard struggles in the 1990s and early 2000s against massive layoffs and privatisations, of which the book provides useful detail.

More important has been the growth of a gigantic new working class drawn from the countryside, which now exists as a permanent urban class of factory and service workers. The authors rightly emphasise the labour struggles of these "migrant workers". Through the 1990s and 2000s, hundreds of millions were driven into new manufacturing and assembly plants. Over a generation, basic working-class consciousness fermented and culminated in the 2010-15 strike wave, as rising

expectations intersected with labour shortages fresh after the Global Financial Crisis.

From 2015, a government crackdown on civil society, an expanded system of court arbitration and the downsizing of labour-intensive manufacturing saw the strike rate decline considerably. But the growth of new sectors, the rise of youth unemployment and the economic slowdown are creating new pressures towards struggle.

The 2022 battle in Zhengzhou against Foxconn management, who had locked two hundred thousand workers inside the factory's "closed-loop" COVID-zero production system, is a thrilling example of the continued potential. "Workers staged perhaps the largest revolt in a decade, with thousands engaging in fierce physical battles with security guards, 'big white' pandemic control workers, and the police. In the aftermath, Foxconn promised to pay 10,000 yuan to workers to *leave* - a huge victory for the rioters" (p.60). The "White Paper Revolution", a moment of nationwide political resistance against harsh lockdown measures, broke out almost immediately after.

Sexual oppression

Chapter four deals with women's oppression and the growth of a new anti-sexist consciousness. This is an important component of the nascent repoliticisation among educated, disaffected youth.

China is a deeply sexist society. Women are expected to care for elderly parents, work in worse-paid jobs than male workers, and bear children they cannot afford to raise. Anger at these and widespread male chauvinism has produced a new feminist sensibility in China, aimed against everything from beauty standards to sexual violence, job discrimination and childbearing expectations.

The authors describe anti-sexist consciousness emerging from a clash of economic and social transformations. On one hand, the destruction of the urban welfare state from the 1980s, and the lack of social rights for migrant workers in cities, has made the cost of raising children prohibitive. At the same time, women are more educated and integrated into public life and work than ever before. They have opportunities and aspirations far beyond the family home.

So even without the abominable practices of the one-child policy, fertility rates would have plummeted. Attempts to increase births by relaxing the one-child policy in recent years have failed. The government faces, from its point of view, a "social reproductive crisis". In other words, it will soon have too few workers to exploit and the "burden" of too many old people.

The chapter focuses strongly on this demographic crisis. Undoubtedly, there is a "pro-natalist" mood in the government. As well as lifting the one-child policy, it legalised having children out of wedlock in 2023(!), implemented a mandatory "cooling-off" period before divorce, and applied minor restrictions on abortion access. These symbolic but reactionary measures increase pressure on women to have children as part of their "natural" and "patriotic" duties.

However, demographics are not the full picture of women's oppression. As the book mentions, the government must square its demand for more children with the need for (low-paid) female labour force participation, among the highest in the world. Anti-sexist anger is also levelled against general male chauvinism in society, such as beauty standards, and sexual violence as exposed in a series of #MeToo cases.

Arguably, the entry of tens of millions of women into urban factories over decades, as well as into the educated professions, would have produced anti-sexist consciousness no matter the

government's social reproduction crisis - as it did during the women's liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s, when fertility rates were falling but still high.

Granted, the government's pushes are clearly making matters worse. Young women are angry at the hypocrisy and unfairness of modern Chinese capitalism and the CCP dictatorship. The CCP leadership therefore treats feminism as a subversive, unpatriotic "Western" ideology. Five leaders of the NGO Youth Feminist Activism were arrested in a high-profile case in 2015. Challenging sexism requires a freedom to organise that the CCP simply will not allow. It will certainly not allow women to expose the abuse perpetrated by China's ruling elite men. Tennis player Peng Shuai suddenly disappeared from public life after she accused former vice-premier Zhang Gaoli of rape in 2021. As such, the authors rightly argue: "China's class inequality, gender oppression and denial of democratic rights are not separate issues; they are profoundly interrelated (p.74)".

For now, only individualistic forms of anti-sexism are articulated, focusing on career advancement or "birth strikes". It may be a while before the authors' hopes of working-class anti-sexist struggle eventuates, but it is right to point in the direction of this immense power: "The combination of the state pressure for women to take up more reproductive labour and the economy's dependence on their labour will stoke resistance among women workers" (p.73).

National oppression

Chapter six deals with China's "national" questions: Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan. China wishes to destroy internal "subversives" (Uyghur Muslims and Hong Kong democrats), and totalise control of crucial geopolitical corridors - into Central Asia (Xinjiang), into South Asia (Tibet), and into the Pacific (Taiwan).

The Tibetans and the Uyghurs of Xinjiang have long been oppressed by the central government. It uses brute force against them and dilutes their claims of national self-determination by encouraging the colonial settlement of Han Chinese (the dominant ethnicity representing around 90 percent of China).

In Xinjiang, the CCP has established a vast system of detention, forced labour and cultural annihilation of the Muslim Uyghurs. Some self-described leftists still claim that news of Uyghur oppression is Western propaganda. Yet the CCP took its anti-Muslim "War on Terror" in Xinjiang straight from the playbook of Western propagandist George W Bush.

The self-determination struggles of Hong Kong and Taiwan are premised more on the defence of political democracy and civil society than on cultural or linguistic differences (although they exist). For historical and geopolitical reasons, this takes the form of a separate national identity in Taiwan; in Hong Kong, the same spirit generally manifests as a local identity. Hong Kong's fight to defend democracy ignited the largest social struggles against the CCP since Tiananmen Square. As a reactionary imperialist ruling class, the CCP dictatorship crushing democratic aspirations anywhere is a disaster for the oppressed everywhere.

In each case, Western powers have used the self-determination struggles cynically. The US and its allies pretend to be defenders of democracy or opponents of genocide. But Western politicians, who cry crocodile tears for the Uyghurs, ship the weapons for genocide in Palestine. Democratic rights in Hong Kong are sacrosanct - but not in the United States itself, where Black Lives Matter or Gaza encampment protesters are met with tear gas and rubber bullets. Taiwanese sovereignty matters, but not that of Iraq, Afghanistan, or practically anywhere else.

The CCP in turn, can cynically exploit the West's cynicism. Speaking against a UK statement at the UN about human rights violations of Muslims in Xinjiang, China's UN representative Zhang Jun deflected effortlessly: "It is the UK that has seen a rise in racism in recent years... It is the US that is known for committing genocide against Native Americans... This list can go on and on! Your hypocrisy, darkness, and evil are the biggest obstacles to the progress of the international human rights cause".⁵

Some on the Western left swallow this hook, line and sinker. Others are less gullible, but squeamish about offering solidarity to mass movements for self-determination at the sight of a small number waving US or UK flags, as in the case of the Hong Kong movement. Right-wing, pro-Western tendencies in movements against the CCP must be opposed, but they are guaranteed to get an upper hand if the left discredits itself with equivocation, abstention or worse. "The international left must not stand on the sidelines of these conflicts. Anti-communist politicians in the West...can only relate to these movements in an opportunistic and self-serving manner... The international left, on the other hand, maintains principles of radical democracy, autonomy and self-determination for oppressed nations as well as racial and ethnic minorities." (p.100).

US-China rivalry

Since the end of the Cold War, the world has moved from the "unipolar" moment of unchallengeable US supremacy to an "asymmetrical multipolar order" (p.106). Not only China, but Russia, expand their sphere of influence. To a much smaller extent, countries such as Israel, Iran, Brazil and Saudi Arabia also have room for manoeuvre.

Yet the rivalry between the US and China, the two largest economies, looms large over the world system and is pushing towards the consolidation of "blocs". All major events become inputs into the US-China struggle for dominance in the Asia Pacific. Far away in Ukraine, Russia's invasion and war has deepened its dependence on China, and on the other hand, reinvigorated NATO and Europe's dependence on the US. The North Atlantic "defence" pact now counts Japan, Australia and the Philippines as "global partners" and officially deems China a "strategic challenge".

What has been called the "New Cold War" differs drastically from the old. The unprecedented integration of world trade and production makes direct conflict unthinkably costly in the immediate term. This informs the strategy, initiated by Trump and expanded by Biden, to incentivise corporations to produce in the US and reduce economic dependency on China.

Elaborate, interventionist economic policies on both sides are a sign of the serious preparations being made for war in the long term. Military budgets increasing year on year is another.

Two more chapters in this section deal with how the climate crisis and pandemic are fed by, and feed into, the imperialist rivalry. Military build-up is locking in unprecedented fossil fuel expansion. Even as China's renewable energy sector expands quickly, it continues to open new coal-fired power stations and sharply increase its oil and gas imports from Russia.

China's climate criminality has become a convenient scapegoat for do-nothing Western emitters. But as the authors note, since China is the preeminent global manufacturer, capitalists the world over bear responsibility. "As foreign direct investment pours into China...global emissions get logged as Chinese emissions....the associated emissions are not 'Chinese' but, in fact, those of global capitalism and its integrated economies" (pp.131-32).

The pandemic has shown that capitalist governments learn nothing in or from a crisis. The need for

international cooperation was junked for international competition such as vaccine races instead. China's COVID-zero policy collapsed under the burden of costs to manufacturing and in the face of popular discontent. When they finally opened up, the Chinese ruling class did so with all the murderous disregard of Boris Johnson or Donald Trump.

International solidarity

In the chapters on international solidarity, the authors discuss the Chinese diaspora in the US. The very large Chinese student population in American universities has experienced some pockets of politicisation. Enrolments in arts and the humanities have expanded, as has engagement in campus protests and activism. Chinese graduate workers even played a notable role in a very successful strike at the University of California in 2022. The stereotype of Chinese international students as apolitical or timid is being challenged - a process radicals have observed on Australian university campuses as well.

International solidarity in a grander sense, however, is a much more daunting task. Even where the anti-imperialist left is small, we must participate in and build movements against Western wars and interventions, against the billions spent on military build-up, and against racism which, as tensions increase, will be directed against Chinese people. Our first obligation is to point out the hypocrisy, lies and crimes against humanity of our Western ruling classes.

Yet an understanding of, and implacable hostility to, Chinese imperialism, is indispensable. When China commits its own crimes against smaller nations, the Western left should not minimise this, but stand with those nations' right to self-determination. Secondly, oppressed people rising up against the Chinese Communist Party are neither part of a CIA plot nor unwitting Western pawns, but our siblings in the struggle for a better world. Lastly, certain diaspora such as hardline CCP loyalists in the West are anti-working class right-wingers from an oppressor nation. They are not allies for the left against Western imperialism.

Naturally, no great strategy can be laid out in this short book for building stronger, more direct ties between US and Chinese workers; the left is in no position anywhere to produce them. In the meantime, the authors argue that "a crucial way to deepen ties on the left internationally is organising discussions, meetings, teach-ins, and conferences about the conflict between the US and China and the urgency of organising international solidarity against it" (p.174). Such educational opportunities are welcome.

However, if eventually we want to move beyond the idea of international solidarity to the concrete reality, we must also commit to building cohered revolutionary socialist organisations in our countries. Only with much greater numbers of activists across various countries can movements that emerge in one place spread over to, amplify, or be backed up by, movements in another. Such activists must be trained in internationalist socialist politics and involve themselves in the day-to-day struggles of workers and the oppressed. This is very difficult in China, where all independent political organising is strictly banned. In the West, where political freedoms are greater, our responsibility to take advantage of it is also greater.

Conclusion

China In Global Capitalism makes an urgent and compelling case for socialism from below against two imperialist powers preparing for catastrophic confrontation. It is a useful guide to China's place

in the many issues that confront anti-capitalists today - climate destruction, women's oppression, national liberation, working class struggle. Such guidance is crucial as genuine socialists continue to do battle against old and new apologetics for imperialism.

"We must proclaim loudly and repeatedly that the fate of marginalized and exploited people around the world are in fact linked... The poor and socially vulnerable populations of Zhengzhou and New Orleans face the rising flood waters of catastrophic climate change, while the rich continue their lavish lifestyles safely barricaded in high rises or bucolic second homes. So now more than ever before, it is time to build the political and organisational groundwork for solidarity against the imperialist scramble for dominance over a global capitalism that threatens the well-being of the entire world" (pp.175-76).

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Footnotes

[1](#) Roberts 2022.

[2](#)Hurun Report, *Global Rich List 2018*.

[3](#)Strangio 2024.

[4](#) See Hore 1991.

[5](#) *Global Times* 2023.

P.S.

• Marxist Left Review. Published 10 March 2025:
<https://marxistleftreview.org/articles/review-china-in-global-capitalism/>