UNENDING CAPITALISM

How Consumerism Negated China's Communist Revolution

KARL GERTH
University of California, San Diego

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CHAPTER I

Self-Expanding and Compulsory Consumerism

Material desires for mass-produced commodities spread quickly during the Mao era. An increasing number of people began to learn about new goods, felt the urge to acquire them, and sought ways to do so, particularly in places privileged by CCP industrial policies, such as cities, state-owned factories, and administrative offices. The story of the spread of these desires, which had already begun to take hold before 1949, helps illustrate how the state both deliberately and inadvertently contributed to building consumerism and negating the Communist Revolution.

Two aspects of consumerism – its self-expanding and compulsory nature – are central to the analysis here. Consumerism begets more consumerism – that is, in China as elsewhere, consumerism, like capitalism, is *self-expanding*.[1] Products became prerequisites for both old and new social activities. To find a better job or a better marriage partner, for instance, Chinese people felt compelled to acquire a bicycle, a fashionable article of clothing, or other mass-produced items. To be sure, the spread of capitalism and consumerism in China encountered numerous obstacles, including a pre-existing cultural value of frugality and revulsion about identities communicated through commodities. Naturally, some people readily embraced the ethos of "hard work and frugal living" as promoted by the party during this period, not only because the mass media told them to do so but also because such an ethos already existed. During the Mao era, consumerism overcame obstacles to its continued expansion, including those erected by the party.

This chapter shows how luxury products became more commonplace and expanded both capitalism and consumerism in the Mao era. In the 1960s, millions of people felt *compelled* to acquire three luxury products in particular: wristwatches, bicycles, and sewing machines. By the end of the Mao era these were widely known and discussed as the Three Great Things (三大件).[2] Before the late 1950s, all three of these goods were difficult to acquire in China. They were usually imported or manufactured by

foreign-owned companies in China and were found only in the homes of those who were well-off. But as domestic industries recovered from decades of war and the state expanded its control over both production and consumption, the Three Great Things became increasingly available throughout China's cities and towns, and even in some rural areas. By the end of the Mao era, production of these items had increased dramatically. In Shandong, for instance, production of the Three Greats approximately tripled between 1975 and 1980, allowing many people to fulfill their desire to own a wristwatch, a bicycle, or a sewing machine.[3] Demonstrating the correlation between the expansion of capitalism and consumerism, the policies and rhetoric of state consumerism shifted from an initial emphasis on thrift to promotion of consumption of the Three Greats.[4] As the original Three Greats gradually began to lose their elite status while spreading throughout the country, by the early 1980s they became known as the Old Three Great Things (老三大件).[5] They were replaced by a newer set of more technologically complex and capital-intensive consumer products such as televisions, washing machines, and refrigerators.[6]

Increased access to the Three Greats in the 1960s was viewed by both the state and the populace as a symbol of socialist success, offering tangible evidence beyond the boastful newspaper headlines that the country was industrializing and becoming wealthier. The party was starting to transform what before 1949 were urban luxuries produced by the imperialists into everyday desirables acquired by new segments of society, and to accumulate the human and industrial capital necessary to mass produce all three things domestically.

Although the ability of people to acquire such goods was cited by the party as an example of the shared prosperity that it touted as proof that it was "building socialism" on its way toward communism, an examination of the distribution of these symbols of economic success shows that in fact policies were introducing, elaborating, and manifesting new forms of social and economic inequalities. As suggested below, although the party made rhetorical and policy gestures toward its stated communist goal of preempting or ending the inequalities associated with industrial capitalism, such inequalities, including those targeted by the party, actually became worse.

Throughout the era, the party sent conflicting messages about consumerism. At the same time that it was reassuring the public that socialism included state-sanctioned inequalities, party rhetoric of "hard work and frugal living" was often equated with socialism. At times the state would

attempt to vilify individual material desires as a threat to both national security and advancement toward the goal of communism. Yet it could not separate consumerism from industrialization, and for political reasons, did not always try. Party leaders understood that prioritizing the expansion of production as an end in itself was the best advertisement for what it would inculcate as "socialism." As Mao once told a visiting Polish delegation, "If China catches up in global industrial production with England and the US, then the majority of [domestic opponents] will consent to socialism."[7]

Just as the defining attribute of capitalism is a political economy – and society – dominated by the needs of capital to be reinvested to create more capital, the expansion of industrial production includes the self-expansion of consumerism. In China, consumerism affected even those without access to or the means to buy things. The discourse about consumerism became more complex as the party-led state capitalism developed new products and brands and state consumerism attempted to shape and control material desires. Living in the midst of a discourse of national backwardness and progress, people used consumerism to overcome a perceived personal backwardness. They began to desire products for both their practical applications and for their social value.

The Production and Introduction of the Three Great Things

The desire for the particular goods that became the Three Great Things was neither inevitable nor innate. Rather, the party focused on producing those consumer products that – like big technologies such as railways, bridges, and roads – it determined would further industrialize the country. The same state that wanted to limit its citizens' material desires also wanted its citizens to desire and to master everyday technologies, or to obtain products that extended to other technologies, particularly those associated with fossil fuel-enabled mass production techniques. I use the word "technology" instead of "product" in this context to underscore a critical element in industrial capitalism: continual, self-expanding compulsory change as a consequence of competition. Whereas a "product" appears to be a finished and end-of-the-road item, an "everyday technology" signals the process of one thing becoming something else, such as a bicycle becoming a better (or less expensive) bicycle or even becoming a car. Additional examples of everyday technologies not covered here include typewriters, radios, gramophones, cameras, rice mills, cigarettes, and many others. Even toothbrushes and toothpastes taught new perceptions of the body and hygiene (for example, that teeth

required regular brushing) and of class and urbanity – that those who did not know to brush their teeth, much less actually brushed them, preferably with a brand-name toothpaste, were backward.[8] Although not included in this book, big technologies were considered critical to increasing productivity and lowering transaction costs; for instance, the way a railroad or bridge might move coal in the northwest to factories in the southeast or move rural crops to urban centers or export markets. Big technologies helped make things faster, better, cheaper, and more ubiquitous. Both before and after the establishment of the People's Republic, Chinese leaders felt compelled to acquire big technologies in order for the nation to survive and prosper.

The production and proliferation of such goods helped the party produce a population capable of competing in the world's new industrial economy, particularly in the context of Cold War rivalries. Chief among these mass-produced everyday technologies were the Three Greats, whose production and promotion increased the productivity of those individuals who possessed and mastered them. Indeed, the Soviet Union placed these three products (and several others) in a special category of mass-produced "cultured goods" and disseminated official statistics (as did the PRC) on the expansion of their production.[9] Through the consumption of these technologies, and often with state urging, such owners enacted an updated, no-longer-backward identity as useful participants in an industrializing country.

State policies and cadres both aided and altered – but could not arrest – the general spread of consumerism. The state's greatest direct control over consumerism was through directing production levels and prices, financing, and distribution policies, including extensive use of rationing throughout most of the era.[10] State policies meant that the availability of highly desired consumer goods varied by region, types of worker, and financial resources. The state also exercised basic control over institutions of consumerism that facilitated demand: advertising, mass media, propaganda campaigns, and other forms of social pressure. Yet, as demonstrated here, people perceived and internalized these messages and used these products in varying, changing, and unanticipated ways. While the state was attempting to shape demand, consumerism was expanding as part of capitalism.

The Three Greats were introduced to China in the late nineteenth century, when imperialism forcibly accelerated the integration of the domestic market into global capitalism and new forms of industrial consumerism. Factories set up in China under the auspices of the imperialist

powers after 1895 introduced mass-produced products and made them less expensive and more accessible. These same companies also expanded the techniques of industrial consumerism that the capitalist firms had developed at home to stimulate material desires.[11] Industry leaders, including the US-based sewing machine company the Singer Corporation, British bicycle manufacturers BSA (三枪牌) and Raleigh (雷利牌), and Swiss watch manufacturers Selca (塞尔卡) and Roamer (罗马), fostered demand with innovative marketing techniques such as new forms of advertising.[12] This imposed industrial capitalism and Sino-foreign contestation over the domestic market, examined in Chapter 2 in greater detail, cast a shadow over all of the Three Great Things. Policies after 1949 intending to replace imported capital and technology and to exercise state control over the domestic market were not unique to the party; rather, they were continuing decades-long efforts that had begun during the Republican era (1912–49). Because the party's primary economic goal during this period was industrialization rather than meeting consumer demand, demand usually outstripped supply, thereby making the distribution of these products a useful tool for identifying state priorities.

The Wristwatch

Among the Three Greats, the one with the most far-reaching social value was the one with the simplest immediate use: the wristwatch. Although timepieces such as clocks and watches are unnecessary for production in pre-industrial agricultural societies, their application value is critical to industrialization. The proliferation of watches in China represented a small, everyday emblem of global competition that included the transformation, standardization, and internalization of time with the establishment of worldwide timekeeping.[13] In particular, soldiers were early adopters of watches, as it was necessary that they synchronize their military maneuvers.[14] Likewise, railroad workers had to adhere to accurate schedules, especially when trains going in opposite directions shared the same tracks.[15] Factory and office workers who relied on timepieces to coordinate labor shifts and schedules used – and felt compelled to acquire – their own watches to counter management control over their time.[16] For these reasons, by making and exporting clocks since the early twentieth century, domestic manufacturers had already responded to the demand for mass-produced timepieces. Although most of this industry was destroyed by the Sino-Japanese and civil wars, production resumed after 1949, and national manufacturing increased from 144,000 clocks in 1952 to over five million clocks by 1962. Domestic production soon included all manner of specialty timepieces, including clocks for planes, boats, and trains, and hundreds of varieties of decorative timepieces. Major brands known throughout the country included Yantai's North Star clocks, Shanghai's Sanwu and Jewel alarm clocks, and Tianjin's Golden Pheasant alarm clocks.[17] Each new brand expanded the range of products available and therefore the different tastes and identities one might express through their possession.

Watches, however, represented the further development of clock-making technology, and China initially lacked the skilled labor and technology to produce them domestically. Technically more complex than a clock, a wristwatch has more than a hundred parts and for assembly it requires more than a hundred procedures. For nearly a decade after 1949, the country relied on imported watches. To develop domestic production, in 1951 the Ministry of Commerce forbade private imports of wristwatches and it centralized all legal imports through Beijing, which then distributed the watches throughout the country via the head office of the state-run China Department Store Company (中国百货总公司).[18] Most (80 percent) of the imported watches during this period were Swiss (which carried the most prestige); China also imported Soviet, French, Japanese, and German watches. Imports in the 1950s fluctuated wildly, from a low of 36,700 in 1954 to a high of 1,341,800 in 1956, but then the number dropped off as domestic production began in the mid-1950s. Even after 1965 when China was producing over a million watches annually, it was still importing many millions more. Women's watches, with thinner bands and smaller faces, were more difficult to obtain because China did not begin to import them until after 1976.[19]

But as early as 1955, the state, which had been forced to compete with foreign manufacturers since the time of the National Products Movement (NPM) during the Republican era (1912–49), mobilized state resources to overcome the technological hurdles of manufacturing its own wristwatches.[20] It encouraged competition among cities throughout the country to compete in producing a working watch; Tianjin was the first to do so, with its Five Star brand watch (五星), which in 1957 was renamed the May Day (五一) brand.[21] Shanghai also competed in such watch-making. In the spring and summer of 1957, the Ministry of Commerce convened watch production research groups, such as a group of fifty-eight technicians from various factories who met in Shanghai in a joint effort to reverse-engineer a watch. Key to this effort were the country's experienced watch repairers, who were accustomed to working on imported watches and could provide engineers with knowledge about different kinds of

watches and a chance to experiment with them. Among the one hundred trial watches that were assembled through this effort, only a dozen or so worked. Finally, by using a Swiss-made Selca watch as a guide, technicians produced a working model. Although the resulting watches were not completely "Chinese," as they relied on imported Soviet and Japanese components, they represented a major step forward in accomplishing the party's goal of producing domestic wristwatches. In 1958, an official state factory was established to mass produce watches, and in that year the new watches entered consumer markets under the brand name "Shanghai."[22]

The CCP's distribution of everyday technologies illustrates the relationship between the expansion of inequalities and industrial capitalism. Because there was not much initial production and imports were tightly restricted, watches remained rare luxury products in the 1950s. Production began slowly, with only 16,800 watches manufactured in 1958. But in that year and the following year, the state established additional factories in Beijing, Guangzhou, Jilin, and Dandong, and other brands soon followed, including the Forward (前进) in 1960, based on a Soviet model (and probably manufactured using Soviet machines), and the Red Flag brand in 1966 that used Swiss equipment. Despite the socialist rhetoric surrounding wristwatches, this first of the Three Greats to enter into domestic production expanded inequalities among the populace. The state regulated access to the purchase of watches to favored select members of society who constituted part of the state's industrialization priorities: workers in the metallurgical industry, shipbuilding, the military, and workers in other key industries, though only with a letter of introduction from their work units, a key institutional arrangement in Chinese state capitalism.[23] These distribution policies reinforced the emerging "three major inequalities" identified by the party itself as attributes of industrial capitalism: between mental/manual, urban/rural, and industrial/agricultural labor. And other forms of inequalities were reproduced anew by industrial capitalism, including inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, region, and one's relationship with the state.

The history of watch production and distribution also illustrates how the state's promotion of consumerism ebbed and flowed depending on its larger economic goals and commitments. As the state ramped up production of consumer goods in the 1960s to restore the economy following the late-1950s policies of rapid industrialization, it dramatically increased domestic production of watches (Figure 1.1). Production continued to expand even during the Cultural Revolution decade (1966–76), and surpassed thirteen million watches per year by 1978.[24] Nonetheless, even then

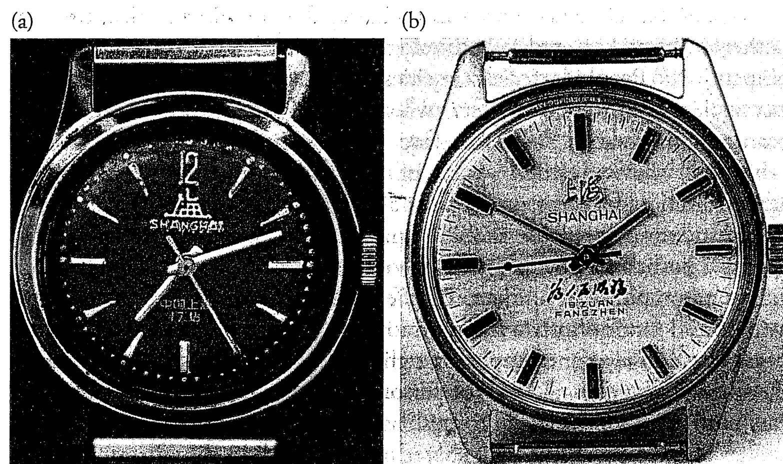

Figure 1.1. Two faces of progress. The proliferation of watches included a diversity of brands and styles to express different consumer tastes. Photographed here are two versions of the most prestigious domestic brand of watch of the Mao era, a Shanghai. The watch on the left is the original Shanghai with a black face and the original logo, modeled after a famous Shanghai building. The Shanghai on the right includes a logo written in Mao Zedong's handwriting, with the Chinese characters lifted from two of his poems. This watch also utilized the time-tested strategy of integrating political slogans into the brand. In this case, "Serve the People" was written below the center of the watch. Left: Author's personal collection. Right: Used with permission from the collection of Shen Yu.

only a small fraction of the country's 700 million potential purchasers owned a watch. Rather than becoming a product distributed to the masses, watches became a much more widespread marker of sophisticated identity, rural prosperity, or, as noted below, cadre status (and corruption). By following the Leninist lead of creating a "socialist" transition that included distribution based on work, the party openly prioritized industrialization over eliminating class differences. By distributing wristwatches to workers in selected jobs and industries, the party was introducing or widening the inequalities associated with industrial capitalism.

The Bicycle

Similarly, the production of bicycles reflected and advanced the state's commitment to industrial production rather than transforming social relations. Paralleling the imperialist-inflected history of wristwatches, mass-produced

brand-name bicycles also arrived in China in the late nineteenth century as another imported everyday technology connected with global capitalist competition.[25] People (especially in cities) had seen bicycles as a status symbol since at least the Republican era, when sought-after British-made bicycles became global brands.[26] Even before the founding of the PRC, owning a bicycle was a critical part of some people's self-identification. Industrialization focusing on workers and capital led to rapid urbanization and an increased need for mobility and transportation. Bicycles were less expensive and easier to operate than other modes of individual transport, such as automobiles or animals. By the 1940s, bicycles had already become a widespread mode of urban transportation and were a pioneering technology of mobility. In 1949, for example, Shanghai alone had some 230,000 bicycles.[27] The spread of bicycles allowed for personal mobility that lasted for some fifty years until automobiles began to push aside bicycles in the 1990s.

The Three Greats spread a shared and expanding discourse of consumerism and branded hierarchies throughout the country. Consumer attitudes and popular discourse about bicycles, for instance, were already in place and ready to expand after 1949.[28] In China, bicycles further helped create a common discourse of consumerism that included a specific vocabulary related to both the general categories of the products ("bicycle") and the branded subcategories (e.g., "Flying Pigeon bicycle"). Naturally, this discourse of consumerism became more complex with the development of industrial capitalism and led to the creation of brand and identity hierarchies. Factories contributed to the expansion of these competing consumer discourses by producing and differentiating their products through unique branding. The subcategories of the Three Greats contributed to brand-based hierarchies that further separated the meaning of commodities and their consumption from their production conditions, a process Marx referred to as fetishization. As Marx observed, the products of labor "appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race."[29] In this way, branding further disguises the social relations of capitalist production – that is, its fetishization – by helping products appear as independent forces in society.

For Marx, commodity production is the foundation of capitalism, so much so he begins *Capital* with a discussion of commodities as so complex as to be "abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."[30] The CCP, by continuing not only to mass produce commodities but also to brand them, further contributed to fetishizing mass-produced goods. Brands enabled discourse about specific products and led to a compulsion

to consume newer, "better" products and to replace older, "backward" products. Consider the difference between the state-produced soap called No. 1 Soap Factory Soap versus the soap called Build the Country or Red Flag Soap. With the development of industrialization and consumerism, not everyone was satisfied once they possessed one item or even a generic item in a category. In the Lower Yangzi valley, one of the wealthiest areas in the country, for instance, by the end of the Mao era a young person sought to display her command over fashion by riding a specific brand of bicycle, i.e., the Forever (永久) brand, or by wearing a Shanghai-brand watch, or listening to a Red Lantern radio (红灯收音机).[31] Although the specific brands that were coveted may have varied, with the spread of industrial capitalism across the globe, within months, years, or several decades very different people throughout China (like others in the capitalist world) learned to desire the same kinds of things.

In China after 1949, the party expanded forms of competition. As with so many other consumer goods, China-made alternatives to imported bicycles sprang up during the Republican era. In the 1920s and 1930s, small "factories" assembled bicycles, using primarily imported parts.[32] As was often the case, inexperienced and less capitalized domestic companies competed at the lower end of the market. Although these companies (like Chinese manufacturers during the period) attempted to profit from patriotic consumer sentiments encouraged by the "buy Chinese" NPM at the time, they concurrently worked to reassure consumers that their products were equivalent to the high-quality imports by associating their products with imports and foreignness. Ironically, domestic producers reinforced consumer preferences for products and brands from the more powerful industrial capitalist countries, that is, those countries that were technologically more sophisticated. For instance, the top Shanghai bicycle maker, Tongchang Garage, which made the Feiren bicycle in 1930, advertised that its bicycles used British and German materials and were produced in a German facility.[33] In 1926 and 1927, Daxing Garage, Runda Garage, and others marketed their China-assembled bicycles as patriotic "national products," even though Daxing Garage had hired two Japanese technicians and used imported parts for its two bicycle brands, Red Horse and White Horse, and Runda Garage's Flying Dragon bicycle also used imported parts. Similarly, the rebirth and rapid growth of the bicycle industry following World War II and in the Mao era was based on expropriated former Japanese-occupied factories in the coastal areas that had better technology than those that had been destroyed during the war.[34] Two of these factories later housed the most coveted brands of the Mao era – the

Flying Pigeon (飞鸽), made at the Tianjin factory, and the Forever brand, made in Shanghai. The third top national bicycle brand of the era, the Phoenix (凤凰), emerged in Shanghai when, in the late 1950s, the state consolidated small shops into the No. 3 Bicycle Factory.[35] Due to these imported technologies, annual domestic bicycle production increased throughout the period, rising from a mere 80,000 bicycles by 1952 to more than 800,000 bicycles by 1957, 1.8 million by 1965, and 8.5 million in 1978.[36] Even during the Cultural Revolution decade, when production of some consumer goods declined or even ceased, the number of bicycle factories expanded from eleven to forty-six.[37]

As with the other Three Greats, the difficulty of acquiring bicycles and their association with the more technologically advanced countries meant that their acquisition represented additional cultural capital (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2. A slave to foreign fashions. These pages from a photo-story book suggest the persistence of both urban preferences for imported brands and the ongoing efforts by state media to fight those preferences and shape consumerism. The story centers on a young woman who "blindly worships foreign products." One day, while riding her British Raleigh bicycle she collides with another rider on a China-made Forever bicycle. Her bicycle is damaged but not his. She agrees to compensation but insists on only parts made by Raleigh. In the photo on the left, the woman states she "does not believe" Forever is China-made until she inspects the fork of the bicycle and its identifying nameplate. In the photo on the right, she says that "China-made products are simply not good" and the bystander scolds her by saying such assumptions exhibit "slavish foreign thinking." After others educate her on the vast improvements of Chinese industry, the young woman becomes convinced that Chinese bicycles, as well as other domestic products, are now as good as foreign ones and agrees to use Forever parts. Source: 气死英国蓝铃牌 – 上海跃进新气象之十 (Angry as hell at England's Raleigh brand – New Happenings in Shanghai's Great Leap Forward, Vol.10.) Shanghai: Shanghai meishu chubanshe, 1958.

The state mediated who would have access to this capital. In Shanghai in the late 1950s, for instance, the local government helped city residents secure better access to bicycles by implementing a registration system to ensure that bicycles were only sold to city residents. One measure of the impact of this preferential policy is that after the city eliminated this requirement, in 1960, an estimated 80 percent of the bicycles were taken out of the city.[38] Not only hard to come by, bicycles were also expensive. In the 1970s, the average price of a bicycle was RMB 159, or more than three months' salary for an urban worker. But among urban households, money was rarely the biggest obstacle; ration coupons (or connections to illegal ration markets to acquire such coupons) were even more crucial.[39] One Beijing cyclist, Zhao Shulan, recalled having a monthly income of RMB 47; even after she had saved enough money for a bicycle, rationing forced her to wait three years before she could purchase one.[40] Despite the wait people had to endure, urban bicycle ownership rose steeply. From 1949 to 1967, residents of Beijing added 50,000 bicycles a year to its streets. From 1967 to 1981, the number tripled to some 150,000 bicycles per year. By 1976, the city had 2.5 million bicycles for a population of 8.5 million.[41] Beijing was hardly alone. Bicycle ownership was nearly universal in Chinese cities by the end of the 1970s. But despite the Maoist rhetoric and the supposed rural basis of the Communist Revolution, by as late as 1978 less than a third of all rural households owned bicycles.[42] Inequality of distribution was a choice, including the state choice over what sorts of bicycles to manufacture. Although it was more difficult to use bicycles on dirt or nonexistent countryside roads, the eventual introduction of sturdier bicycles with thicker rims that could be used under such conditions confirms that the state placed a priority on its urban-based industrial strategy over the people's desire and need for greater mobility in the countryside. Thus, even the types of bicycles that were developed focused on urban industrialization, further entrenching a pattern of urban/rural inequalities whereby products were first developed in cities and only later modified to appeal to the needs of rural consumers.[43]

The Sewing Machine

Sewing machines further strengthened the association of imported foreign products with superior technology. As elsewhere, sewing machines so effectively served basic needs in China that they became one of the first everyday machines to reach the Chinese market. In comparison with other labor-saving textile machines, treadle-operated sewing machines

were inexpensive, efficient, portable, multifunctional, and as useful in villages as they were in cities.[44] The technology vastly increased the productivity of women and girls, who were the primary users, a process that reproduced the gendered division of textile production.[45] Although few households in late-industrializing countries, such as China and India, could afford sewing machines of their own during the first half of the twentieth century, knowledge of and a desire for such machines was widespread, setting the stage for their eventual place as one of the Three Greats.[46]

During the Republican era, Chinese private capitalists began to develop the technical expertise to build and maintain consumer sewing machines. As early as 1928, there were attempts to produce sewing machines domestically with the Conquer America brand (Shengmei 胜美), its name once again an attempt to pass itself off as both a patriotic product and an import to gain market share.[47] Even as the name appealed to the patriotic movement to replace foreign goods with China-made goods (as discussed in Chapter 2), the name of the China brand sounded similar to – and shared the first character in its name with – the largest international sewing machine manufacturer, the American Singer company, which was known in Chinese as Shengjia (胜家, or "Conquer the Household"). Emulating an established brand name was not enough to win market share, however, and this initial domestic attempt – like many others – failed. Domestic competitors built the majority of their sewing machines for use in textile factories rather than as consumer products, and they were large, inelegant, and expensive.[48]

After 1949, however, state consumerism put an end to the import of household sewing machines. China-made sewing machines became critical for meeting domestic demand and fulfilling export aspirations. Within three years, there were five state sewing machine manufacturers spread along the eastern coast, with three in Shanghai, one in Guangzhou, and one in Qingdao. These five exceeded earlier production, manufacturing 66,000 machines per year, or thirteen times more than the number produced by Chinese factories at the end of the civil war. By the end of the 1950s, the CCP had expropriated, reorganized, and added two more factories, making a total of seven factories, and by 1964 there were factories in twenty-eight cities throughout the country.[49] In the mid-1960s, domestic manufacturers produced more than one million machines per year, representing a huge state-funded expansion. From 1952 through 1978, or roughly during the entire Mao era, China produced some forty-seven million sewing machines.[50]

In addition to fueling people's desire for nicer things and better lives, sewing machines had a number of specific application values that helped create grassroots demand. For instance, sewing machines allowed households both to produce and alter their own clothing to make it more practical or even more fashionable. This created a feedback loop by which meeting the desire for sewing machines in turn created a greater desire for fashionable or simply better-fitting clothing. At the lower end of the economic ladder, sewing machines allowed families to stretch their limited incomes by repurposing old tattered clothing by stitching several pieces together, covering up holes, or making blankets out of scraps. Sewing machines gave the family, particularly its female members, a chance to make additional money or to accrue favors by sewing for others, creating even more fuel for the bottom-up demand.[51]

Sewing machines could have various practical applications for the same person. Wang Yushi, a woman born in 1955 and interviewed in 2014, reported that her mother, who had acquired a sewing machine several years after her marriage, had specified three reasons why the sewing machine was significant to her family in Ji'nan.[52] First, owning a sewing machine meant the family could do what nearly everyone then did: make their own clothing or alter what they bought. Wang's mother made clothing for her siblings and eventually for her daughter and son. Such clothing was both functional and fashionable, as she altered the hemlines, for example, to follow the fashions. Second, people during the Mao era often had a number of children so they had to economize and avoid spending the precious cloth rations by using hand-me-down clothing. Sewing machines enabled them to alter their clothing for the next child. Third, Wang's mother personally enjoyed making clothing; sewing gave her pleasure. The increased productivity and extra income generated by the use of the sewing machine then fed into another round of self-expanding consumerism that further separated the sewing machine haves from the sewing machine have-nots.

Popular linkages of sewing machines with an idealized vision of femininity also expanded material desires for them. Young women learned to use a sewing machine from a friend or a relative, creating a sense of communal identity. The sewing machine was so closely associated with femininity due to word-of-mouth, previous advertising, established tastes, and popular representations in the mass media such as films, that men using them were mocked.[53] Due to this social value,

even if among the Three Greats a sewing machine was the hardest to acquire, it was probably also the most significant for a bride. A young woman who could attract a partner who was able to offer a sewing machine as one of the betrothal gifts gave her entire family "face," or cultural capital.[54]

Growing Inequalities

In mastering and making the most out of the Three Greats during the Mao era, people simultaneously expanded and strengthened inequalities. For example, as it became more critical for urban workers to regulate time, watches became increasingly necessary and common in factories and offices.[55] The growing popularity of cycling, both for transportation to work and for pleasure, helped popularize watches, which could be consulted much more easily than a pocket watch while riding a bicycle. The spread of the Three Greats accordingly highlights how one act of consumption, purchasing a bicycle, created a desire for another – a watch to tell the time while riding the bicycle.

The proliferation of the Three Greats did not affect the country uniformly. Consumption patterns varied by time and place (Figure 1.3). A factory manager in Shanghai – where there were over ninety well-known brands of products by the end of the Mao era – would have had very different experiences communicating identity through consumption than, say, a farmer in rural Guangxi province. They would also have a higher salary and more opportunities to acquire such products.[56] As the expanding social and economic inequalities during this period suggest, tens of millions of Chinese did not engage in much consumption. There were countless villages throughout China that had little exposure to the Three Greats, and they would not obtain them for years, or even for decades, after city residents had acquired them. Despite these local differences, however, consumerism continued to spread as more people used these technologies to compete with others. The use of a bicycle to bring crops to the market, a sewing machine to sell additional labor power, or a wristwatch to store and transport value were all instances of using the technology to compete. Consumerism and the desire for branded products affected tens of millions of urban and rural households. Increasing numbers of people came to know about, desire, and even feel compelled to acquire the Three Greats, even years before they might have the opportunity to do so.

Figure 1.3. Conduits of consumerism. The state rusticated these three young urbanites along with over twelve million others. The men, photographed around 1970 during a visit home, wore local brand Zhongshan watches on their wrists, trendy clothing (note the sailor t-shirt on the right), and a typical Mao-era gaze into the "brighter future." Their wristwatches and clothing symbolize the better access to better products available to urban rusticated youth, which set them apart from their rural hosts and taught them about the massive and growing inequality between urban and rural China. Source: The personal collection of Xi Chen.

The Proliferation of Reasons to Desire Commodities

By the 1960s, China was producing millions of these consumer products and had transformed what had been luxury goods for the wealthy into more accessible everyday items in the cities and parts of the countryside. At the same time, demand for these products as practical tools, social

lubricants, and status symbols spread and intensified. People's recollections of the compulsion to acquire these things reflect how their social meaning and value expanded and deepened consumerism. Such memories of material desires and acquisitions offer a different perspective from histories focused on politics, transcending the previous focus on the era as a history of a procession of mass campaigns.[57] Many people vividly recall how they acquired the Three Greats and what the items meant to them more than they remember the mass campaigns of the Mao era.

The aspects of the Three Greats most recalled by people posting memories on blogs who lived through the Mao era are the challenges to obtain them, the pride in owning them, and their social value. These bloggers all described learning to navigate the complex social meanings that consumer goods could communicate. People who obtained watches during this period invariably had a story to tell about how exactly they acquired their watch and how they initially felt wearing a watch as well as about the identities, whether intended or not, the watches communicated to others. A middle-school teacher, for instance, recalled that he was the first person at his school to wear a watch. Rather than hide it, he proudly displayed it by alternating between a more discreet metal band for most of the year and a showy white canvas band that attracted attention to the watch during the summer. As proud as he felt about his watch, he recalled that when he wore his white canvas watchband to meet his girlfriend's parents for the first time, they regarded him as an inappropriate suitor because his conspicuous consumption indicated a lack of maturity rather than a status symbol.[58] Others encountered similar problems due to the conflicting meanings of their consumer products. A university instructor recalled that his top material desire when he began his first job was to buy a watch. After sending part of his salary home to his parents, he saved as much as he could, and after three years, he finally had enough to buy a top-of-the-line Enicar (英纳格) watch for RMB 148, or roughly three months' salary of the average factory worker. But when he finally bought the watch and had a chance to show it off at school, a cadre pulled him aside and asked him to consider the influence his watch might have on the other teachers and staff at the university who could not afford such an expensive possession. The cadre urged him not to set himself apart so conspicuously by wearing the watch.[59]

Most importantly, owning all Three Greats communicated a family's financial well-being. While a bicycle or a sewing machine had practical applications, a watch was a clear signal of above-average household wealth and a household's access to privileged products, particularly if the watch was a high-status foreign brand. Families regarded a top-brand watch as a precious item, almost as if it were an heirloom. Of the Three Greats, watches were usually the least functional, suggesting that they had the greatest social value. After all, there was no shortage of clocks and bells (and later loudspeakers) to indicate the time. Watches, unlike the other two items, had been communicating a high status since the Republican era.[60] Watches broadened or, to use the party's preferred term, "massified" (大众化) the consumerism of a bourgeois status marker from the pre-1949 era. Ownership of a watch became increasingly compulsory for a growing segment of the population as a consequence of its practical application. However, a watch also carried bourgeois social connotations that some people (such as cadres) wished to avoid. At other times, however, the needs of the industrializing society carried the day, compelling people to seek ways to acquire a watch.

The desire for a watch undermined party efforts to promote a general ethos of frugal living. When courting, for instance, a watch was critical both as a status marker and as a gift. The popularization of watches fit into the long-existing material desires for betrothal gifts that the groom's family was expected to give to the bride's family along with the bride price – traditionally cash given in red envelopes. By the 1950s, even working-class factory women in Beijing had begun to gage a suitor's fitness by whether he owned a watch. At a Beijing cotton-weaving factory, for example, two women culled their dating pools by demanding up front that their prospective partners provide them with a watch and clothing, though they would return the gifts if the relationship ended.[61] Watches did more than signal financial success; they indexed an individual's social progress in overcoming backwardness. According to a study of marriage by the scholar Neil Diamant, "suburban women considered clocks and watches symbols of the urban modernity they lacked." Indeed, Diamant suggests, during these years many women cared more about finding a husband who could give them a watch than finding a husband who could provide a high political status.[62] The weight attached to material considerations is all the more significant given that women and their offspring acquired the political status of their husband's family, so a woman from a bad class background would generally seek to marry into a family with a better class background.[63]

The social value of sewing machines was vital for successful competition in the marriage market. Whereas a prospective groom might use a sewing machine to demonstrate to his betrothed's family his ability to provide for a family, a potential bride might use her possession of – and even her desire for – a sewing machine to convey her competence as a future wife, mother,

and daughter-in-law. It was these social values that drove women's compulsion to obtain sewing machines. Despite their industrial associations, sewing machines were associated with femininity because of the preexisting gendered division of labor, advertising, and popular representations in the mass media. This social value meant that the sewing machine was also often the most important betrothal gift to a bride and her family.[64] The numerous connotations surrounding purchase and ownership of a sewing machine highlight how deeply consumerism shaped lived social realities.

As consumerism developed during the Mao era, products came to communicate different messages depending on the owner and the context. When eighteen-year-old Li Dong joined the air force as a mechanic for the J-6 fighter jet, for instance, he and the others from Shanghai were proud of the possessions they had brought to the base with them, including soap to wash their uniforms, heavier blankets, and scented lotions (which they would put under their noses to mask the smell of the latrine). Soldiers from smaller towns and villages either lacked or did not use any of these products. The commodities used by soldiers from Shanghai quickly attracted attention. Although the better possessions of these young men communicated urbane identities and superior educations, two forms of human capital, they drew criticism from superior officers who invoked the oft-promoted "socialist" ethos of hard work and frugal living and considered the nice shirts and wristwatches of the Shanghai recruits to be bourgeois extravagances. A superior officer informed Li Dong that if he continued to display these goods, he would not be allowed to join the Communist Party, which was the goal of every upwardly mobile soldier. Thereafter, Li Dong never showed his watch to anyone and he kept it in his pocket only to consult it on the sly.[65]

Even in the supposedly egalitarian military culture of the 1970s, a time when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) removed their rank insignia, the social meanings of watches grew. In the novel *Jiyi honghuang* (*A Flood of Memories*), loosely based on her military experience, author Xiang Xiaomi describes the military sumptuary regulations she experienced in the early 1970s: only officers wore watches, leather shoes, and four-pocket army uniforms. Even if the regular soldiers owned such things, they would not wear them until they were promoted. Because word of a promotion – and hence the right to display such items – might arrive before their new state-issued clothing, soldiers who were about to be promoted routinely purchased or received a watch as a gift so they could don it immediately after their promotion was announced. As Xiang recalled, watches further

differentiated soldiers by origin, with rural cadres wearing the formerly fashionable Shanghai watches and urban cadres preferring the latest imports from Japan and Switzerland, signaling both one's standing as a cadre and one's family origins.[66]

Differentiating watches by gender was yet another way that social value was expanded, increasing consumer demands for updated products and thereby further expanding consumerism. For most of the Mao era, women's watches were rare, and therefore women, if they had a watch at all, wore men's watches with larger faces. Although women's watches were still rare in Ji'nan in the late 1970s, Feng Guoqing managed to acquire a smuggled imported Japanese Omega from a friend who had bought several watches on the state-tolerated gray market during a business trip to Shanghai, and he offered it to his future wife as an engagement present. It was the only thing she had requested, as she already owned a bicycle, did not want a sewing machine, and said that she wanted to go easy on Feng and his family in terms of wedding expenses. Accepting Feng's gift was the equivalent to accepting his marriage proposal. The women's watch cost RMB 60, which was less than the price of a bicycle or sewing machine, but it still represented roughly half of Feng Guoqing's disposable income for the entire year. (When asked why she remembers the price, she replied, "it would be impossible to forget it given the importance of the watch.")[67] Even though giving her a watch did not signal to her family or the broader community that he was wealthy, it did suggest that, in addition to being a thoughtful person, Feng Guoqing was capable of working the system to obtain critical, if difficult to acquire, items. The watch was evidence that the couple would have a minimum standard of living, especially as Feng's future wife estimated that at the time fewer than half of her friends and acquaintances had received watches as betrothal gifts.

Relatives also gave watches as gifts. When Ni Ping was preparing to leave Qingdao in 1976 to further her education at the Shandong Arts Academy, her mother wanted to buy her a watch as a going-away present. The local department store only had Shanghai-brand watches, which were not particularly feminine, with the "big round faces" that were favored by men. Showcasing how the desire for higher-status imported brands transcended generations, Ni Ping actually preferred her mother's watch, a Swiss Roamer, which was old but feminine and expensive. However, Ni Ping eventually agreed to accept a Shanghai watch, which, although fashionable, was less expensive than her mother's watch and therefore it would be less of

a loss if it were stolen.[68] Depending on the style, brand, and design, watches communicated everything from one's gender identity to one's financial stability.

Changes in how people used the Three Greats created new social value for the products.[69] In the case of bicycles before 1949, physical exertion in public had lower-class associations, a social value that initially discouraged upwardly mobile men (much less women) from riding bicycles. After 1949, however, bicycles and working-class attributes, such as hard work, were equated with masculinity and positive "socialist" attributes. Simply knowing how to ride a bicycle became such an essential masculine skill that young men would not wait until they had their own bicycle to learn how to ride one. While young women learned to use a sewing machine by practicing with one owned by a neighbor or friend, teenage boys learned to ride a bicycle of a neighbor or a friend long before they could own one. During the 1970s, for instance, Cao Dongmei's two brothers, who grew up in the small Jiangsu town of Qidong, borrowed bicycles from their classmates and became competent riders years before their family could afford to buy even one bicycle.[70] Beyond expressing one's personal identity, people bonded and shared communal identities based on consumer goods. In addition, as women entered (or were coerced into) the formal economy at the end of the 1950s, they too needed a means of transport from home to work. Their entry into the labor force further heightened demand for – and increased the utility of – bicycles. Simultaneously, the increasing number of women riding bicycles spurred efforts to differentiate the types of bicycles by gender. Chinese society in the 1950s overcame earlier objections that the riding of bicycles by women was indecent, consequently doubling the potential demand for bicycles.[71] During the first decade of party rule, riding a bicycle lost its previous negative connotations for both men and women, thereby greatly expanding the application value and demand for bicycles – and the corresponding compulsion for new segments of the population to acquire bicycles.[72]

From the countless numbers of such stories, one theme emerges: people spread consumerism and demand for the Three Greats even before, and indeed sometimes without, actually acquiring them. Knowledge about and the desire for products spread faster than their acquisition. Even a very poor person with little chance of acquiring a Three Great might have seen a Three Great on a city street advertisement or in the thousands of state-made movies that were shown by traveling film teams that visited isolated villages. As a result, these products began to influence their lives. For example, they may have been told that their marriage prospects were

bleak because their family could not acquire the Three Greats or because they may have seen the Three Greats owned by others, and they began to wonder how they could acquire them. In these and other ordinary ways, people learned about and perhaps began to feel compelled to desire these consumer products, thereby participating in, deepening, and expanding consumerism.

Gray Economic Activities and the Inability to Constrain Consumerism

The growing application and social values of the Three Greats and the accompanying shortages of all three further heightened desires for these everyday technologies. Such unmet and growing demands contributed to the development of an informal or gray economy of illicit consumption that was tacitly permitted by the state.[73] From the perspective of the state, both the unsanctioned desire for, as well as the unsanctioned means to acquire, the Three Greats threatened to undermine state control over the economy; people increasingly looked to the non-state sector of the economy to fulfill their material desires. Yet the more the state restricted consumption via production and distribution, the more it incentivized the non-state-controlled part of the economy, including state and collective factories that were operating without permission to fulfill such needs. When examined close up, the state economy appeared much less planned than it did on paper, as the expanding material desires created zones of gray economic activities.[74]

In an economy rife with fears of shortages and theft, some people turned to the gray economy to acquire the Three Greats as an alternative form of currency. Farmers, for instance, hoarded the Three Greats as a way to store value.[75] Likewise, because watches were small in size, high in value, and portable, they were favored by smugglers.[76] Most illicit activities were relatively minor. Jiang Yigao, a retired riveter at a factory outside of Chongqing, recounted how he helped his younger brother play the local ration coupon exchange market.[77] When Jiang's younger brother decided to escape the poverty of the Sichuan countryside by joining the army, Jiang wanted to help his brother find a safe and practical way to store and transport his modest belongings. After his younger brother exchanged his possessions with local farmers for 167.5 kg of grain rations, Jiang sold the ration coupons. Although technically illegal, such activity was ordinary. According to Jiang, industrial workers often discussed buying, selling, and trading ration coupons. They debated prices and attempted to maximize

profits by openly discussing how and where to get the best prices for extra ration coupons. Jiang admitted to having sold 145 kg of grain ration coupons for RMB 110, but he was apprehended in one of the periodic police crackdowns before he could sell his remaining coupons. Because he had a clean record and was a model worker, he got off by writing a self-criticism, and although he was denied promotion and party membership for one year, the police allowed him to retain his earnings. In the end, with the RMB 110 and twenty industrial rations, Jiang had finally accumulated the necessary combination of cash and rations to buy a much sought-after consumer good for his younger brother – a Shanghai brand watch.

Due to persistent shortages, the numerous ways to present the Three Greats as gifts, and the operation of the gray economy, people routinely purchased watches and other high-value consumer products that they did not intend to use themselves or did not need immediately. The social value of the Three Greats and the compulsion to possess them worked against the state ethos of frugal living, despite the state's focus on expanding domestic production. Although watches were easier to acquire than bicycles or sewing machines, depending on place and time the number of those either produced or imported was usually insufficient to meet demand. The scarcity of watches created an environment of opportunistic shopping, whereby people were always on the hunt to prepare for future needs. By the end of the 1950s, when the state fixed ration coupons to specific locations and individuals could not easily travel without official permission, business trips became ideal opportunities to learn about how to acquire products from other places, particularly for those who did not live in major cities. Serendipity played a critical role in such shopping, as highly desirable products were seldom available; so those on business trips headed to the main shopping thoroughfares, such as Nanjing Road in Shanghai or Wangfujing in Beijing, without a specific shopping list but just hoping to be lucky.

Such shopping was opportunistic in both senses of the term, as shoppers took advantage of the opportunity to travel to acquire products that they did not need but they anticipated would be much more valuable back home. For Mr. Cheng, a manager at the Changzhi Iron and Steel factory in Changzhi, Shanxi province, this sort of ever vigilant shopping became a way of life.[78] The small city of Changzhi, while symbolically and economically central to party policies, did not have as much access to top consumer goods as the larger cities that Mr. Cheng frequently visited when he traveled on official business. Whenever he traveled to major cities such as Beijing or Shanghai, he would purchase whatever desirable goods he

could find, intending to give any he did not need as presents or finding other ways to later transfer their value. On a successful trip to Beijing in the late 1950s, for instance, he came across a used Swiss women's watch, a rare find. At the time, he did not know enough about watches to tell the difference between women's and men's wristwatches, but he thought the smaller watch was more stylish than the bulkier Chinese watches that had just begun to enter the market. He already knew that people considered Swiss watches to be the best, indicating that the discourse of consumer brands and their associated hierarchy had begun to spread throughout the country beyond the few major coastal cities. Because his monthly salary was less than half of the RMB 100 needed to buy a Swiss watch, he and a colleague decided to split the cost of the watch and trade off wearing it each month. Cost, however, was not the only obstacle. A letter from a work unit was also sometimes needed to obtain the most sought-after products. Fortunately, one of Mr. Cheng's contacts in Beijing agreed to write such a letter. Although Cheng and his colleague had no intention of selling the watch for a profit, they clearly believed that the social value of the watch was so great that they were willing to go to all this trouble. Their consumer instincts later proved to be correct. When it came time for Mr. Cheng to ask his girlfriend to marry him, his colleague agreed to let him give her their Swiss watch as a betrothal gift, which remained her cherished possession until the early post-Mao era when, heralding the accelerated consumerism, she took it to a local repairman who convinced her to trade it in for a newer watch as hers had already lost much of its original social value. In doing so, she inadvertently reaffirmed her compulsion to continue using an act of consumption to communicate social value.

People's material desires were so frequently filled via these indirect routes that they did not consider that obtaining consumer goods on the gray market was illicit. In the earlier story about Feng Guoqing's acquisition of a smuggled watch, only China's expanding contacts with international consumer markets enabled him to buy the watch. The watches Feng came across in gray markets could have been bought from smugglers or from people who had received gifts from overseas relatives, the two most common non-state-sanctioned channels. When asked about the dangers of owning an illicitly obtained watch, he responded that at the time he did not think of such products in terms of "legal" or "illegal," but rather as "available" or "unavailable." This was a widely adopted perspective that involved using extended networks to secure products that were only available in the major cities. Feng's uncle, for instance, regularly went to Guangzhou and

always returned home to Ji'nan with smuggled goods, never worrying about being caught.[79]

Illicit economic activities aided the expansion of the state economy. Although party leaders expected that the cadres staffing the bureaucracy of the centrally planned state-owned economy would serve as socialist models for the rest of society, demand for the Three Greats was so widespread that local cadres found that the Three Greats and other consumer goods were more effective than cash to facilitate transactions with factories, work units, and even communes that were trying to obtain the necessary industrial products to fulfill state contracts. Products are universally used as a way to store and transfer value whenever money is an inappropriate or insufficient means of obtaining a desired good or service. But due to consumer shortages, as noted, one might additionally need ration coupons, a letter of authorization from a work unit, or political access to secure the Three Greats and other consumer products that were in high demand. All of which cadres were in a position to provide. In this way, material desires fulfilled through non-state channels contributed behind the scenes to the functioning of the planned part of the economy.

The norms propagated from on high ran into on-the-ground realities, revealing fissures between different levels of the state. On the one hand, Mao and party leaders understood the danger of cadres becoming an exploitative new class and thereby undermining public confidence in the effort to "build socialism." They further understood that business practices such as using the Three Greats to grease illicit business deals – practices they labeled "capitalist" – siphoned resources from the official planning goals, even when cadres did not corruptly take the resources for themselves but rather used them for purposes useful to the state. The Central Committee criticized the unexceptional practice of local commercial departments using high-end goods, such as watches and bicycles, to build business relationships among work units and to facilitate illicit trade. On the other hand, in a more localized version of the state logic guiding state capitalism at the national level, local cadres claimed that the economic development ends of their practices justified the supposedly capitalist means. For instance, the Central Committee circulated a report by local cadres in Guangdong province which argued: "Using gifts to build good business relationships may be a capitalist approach to business, but such practices have positive effects on the development of socialist business."[80] In response, the Central Committee insisted that the end of improved productivity did not justify the continued use of capitalist means, concluding that using the Three Greats to bolster social and business connections amounted to a "capitalist restoration" (资本主义复辟) within the society, a common term for the party to express concern over the negation of the revolution. Although such practices were so commonplace that the party felt the need to publicly admonish the local Guangdong cadres, punishment for these activities was typically not severe enough to discourage such behavior. At the top, the party, while it was ideologically opposed to it, tacitly accepted "capitalist" behavior that advanced its industrial goals, tolerating local cadre rule-breaking because it expanded capital. But the party would periodically launch campaigns to rein in the worst manifestations at the local level of the central contradiction between the espoused goals of building socialism and the widespread evidence of practices the party identified as capitalist.

The use of bicycles as an illicit form of payment clarifies the trouble work units went to in order to engage in illicit exchanges, creating a complex and deep gray economy in which consumer goods served many unsanctioned purposes. Indeed, gray market activity appeared so open and integral to local economies that it hardly appeared gray from the point of view of Beijing. In the capital of Shanxi province, the Taiyuan Market and Price Administration Committee recorded a series of illicit trades that began with the visit of four men from Dingzhou Commune, located in the neighboring province of Hebei. In February 1960, Ma Xifu, head of Dingzhou factory, Chen Shusen, the sales representative of another factory, and several of their co-workers arrived at the New People's Hotel in Taiyuan, laden with fourteen watches, four bicycles, three industrial cooling fans, RMB 4,200 in cash, and other industrial products. According to the report, their plan was to engage in the "illegal activity" of exchanging their goods for essential industrial materials. Ma Xifu began by contacting Mao Tongyi, who was from the same hometown and worked at the Taiyuan Water and Electric Installation Company. Through Mao Tongyi's various local contacts, Ma Xifu exchanged the watches, bicycles, and other items he had brought with him for seven motors, a bench drill, two winding machines, and 100 kilos of aluminum. This illicit "trade delegation" was also involved in smaller transactions. Chen Shusen used his own contacts to exchange two Flying Pigeon bicycles and other goods for four motors from several local factories. In all of these various transactions, bicycles and watches were used for direct exchanges as well as for gifts to thank the local contacts.[81]

Beneath such stories of illicit trade, the national and local goals of industrialization further intensified the desire to acquire the Three Greats so as to accelerate more industrialization. In its findings, the

Taiyuan Market and Price Administration Committee concluded that the desire of the Dingzhou Commune for these exchanges was admirable because the products that it received were critical for electrification. Nevertheless, the means of acquisition – illegally exchanging bicycles, watches, and other materials – was a "serious" infraction of market administration rules and of planned goods distribution. Consequently, the committee imposed on the two factories fines of RMB 1,000 and RMB 500 respectively, a total comprising less than half the amount the men had spent for their illicit purchases. Additionally, only one person was lightly disciplined. The committee recognized, as did so many cadres, that the commune – and more broadly, the state economy – could not operate without the aid of the gray markets and "capitalist" exchanges.[82]

Despite this widespread recognition, throughout the Mao era, cases of corruption – that is, the use of public power for private gain – tended to single out possession of the Three Greats, particularly high-status brands, as irrefutable evidence of graft. Possession of the Three Greats proved guilt by material association. Such cases can be found throughout the whole economy during the entire era. For example, the case of Zhang Zigang, who worked in the medical department of the Harbin railway, provides an ordinary and minor corruption case from December 1951. As part of the evidence against him, the court record noted that he owned five Western-style dress shirts, two Parker pens, an Enicar waterproof wristwatch, and a bottle of perfume. Specifying the brands added extra weight to the evidence against Zhang and provided evidence that brand hierarchies among consumer goods had become widely known and desired even in the early PRC, to the extent that they were admissible evidence in a court of law. Parker was the leading global brand of pen of the period, and the Swiss watch Enicar was particularly sought after among railway workers because it was not only a fashionable foreign brand but also had a reputation for keeping the most accurate time and having an especially easy-to-read face.[83] In another case, during a period of lenience toward consumerism following the Great Leap Forward, Liu Shaoqi antagonized local officials by suggesting that cadre ownership of highly desired products "stank of corruption." He asserted that "with a glance," one could identify corrupt local cadres by checking to see if they wore a watch, lived in a renovated house, or owned a bicycle or radio, luxuries that ordinary members of a commune could not afford.[84] The Central Committee, with the approval of the State Council, moved beyond the browbeating of local officials by demanding that the People's Bank forbid local-level cadres from using administrative credit lines to buy nice things for themselves.[85] But the

compulsion to acquire the Three Greats continued to override state demands that cadres should seek to embody a state consumerist ethos of frugality.

Although using the Three Greats and other consumer goods to facilitate illicit trade between work units received only minor criticism, transactions for the purpose of a cadre's private enrichment were examples of the kind of capitalism and unbridled consumerism that the state wanted to quash. According to the vocabulary of the party, personal accumulation of such products by cadres signified "capitalist restoration" and the "restoration of an upper class," that is, cadres at the local level were becoming the feared exploitative new class that would negate the revolution. Consequently, public and internal party documents warned cadres within local commercial departments in places such as Shantou, the port city in Guangdong province, against demanding bribes in the form of watches and bicycles, which local cadres were using not simply to "open the back door" for illicit trade with other factories but also to enrich themselves and their families.[86]

Just as brand status could serve as evidence in a court of law underscoring the desirability of certain brands, so efforts to suppress private and personal consumption stimulated people's material desires. Zhang Huihu, for instance, recalled viewing a film when he was a child in the 1970s in which the villain was identifiable because he wore several watches on his wrists, which, Zhang's father had explained, indicated the man was guilty of corruption. Yet such state messaging inadvertently reinforced brand hierarchies, as Zhang learned that of all the watches, the Shanghai brand was the best. Thereafter, Zhang remembered, he had desired a Shanghai watch since the age of ten, and even when he later acquired a watch of his own he was not satisfied because it was not a Shanghai brand.[87] Zhou Baoxing, a watch collector, told the story of a classmate who, like millions of others, had been expelled from school in the city and sent to the countryside to engage in agricultural work. Most of the urban youth who were sent to the countryside wanted to return home, but they required official permission, otherwise they would have difficulty obtaining ration coupons and finding employment in the cities. Zhou's classmate met the qualifications to return to his urban home, but a local cadre blocked his return by refusing to provide him with the appropriate forms. Through a third party, the cadre suggested that if the student "gave the cadre a Shanghai watch," the cadre would "hand over the form" (decades later, Zhou remembered this request because the expression "fill out a form" [填个表] in Chinese is a homophone for "add a watch" [添个表]). The student's parents, who were both factory workers, struggled but finally obtained a watch, which they exchanged for their son.[88] Beyond

showing that watches had become a substitute currency that facilitated bribery, their story demonstrates that even the leader of a small rural village was aware of the hierarchy of watch brands and the top place in the domestic hierarchy held by Shanghai watches.

Conclusion

The small sample of stories included here, drawn from innumerable new experiences with commodities, begins to reveal the contours of how nascent consumerism began to encourage material desires. Far from disappearing as the party "built socialism" on its way to communism, the spread of material desires for these mass-produced items and the social values attached to them provide ample evidence of the deepening demand side of industrial capitalism. By justifying these inequalities as a necessary but temporary stage of socialism, the party tacitly endorsed the accompanying expression of these inequalities.[89] Facilitating the expansion of consumerism ultimately accelerated the negation of the Communist Revolution.

To compete socially in post-1949 China, it was not always enough to have one or all of the Three Greats. Rather, starting from a modest number of elites, an increasing number of individuals began to learn to differentiate themselves by acquiring knowledge of, desire for, and then possession of the trendiest brands. One such example is Chen Yilin, who began his odyssey as the proud watch owner of a regional brand, the Yangcheng (羊城), made in Guangzhou. His colleagues initially coveted his watch, so in addition to its practical value of telling time, it also had the social value of producing envy. But as more of his colleagues acquired their own watches and even the more prestigious Shanghai watches, the social value of Chen's watch declined. Chen began to feel self-conscious and the subject of the same compulsive force of envy he himself had earlier engendered, especially after a colleague told him directly that "no one wears a Yangcheng anymore." His once-smart Yangcheng, which still kept time, had become a marker of backwardness, and therefore he replaced it with a Shanghai watch. Thereafter, as industrial consumerism continued to exert coercive pressure on Chen to acquire consumer goods, he remained vigilantly brand-conscious, and when Japanese Citizen watches reentered the Chinese marketplace at the end of the 1970s, Chen was among the first to acquire this trendiest brand (Figure 1.4).[90]

The spread of consumerism reflects the party's prioritization of capital accumulation over eliminating inequalities and empowering labor. Rather

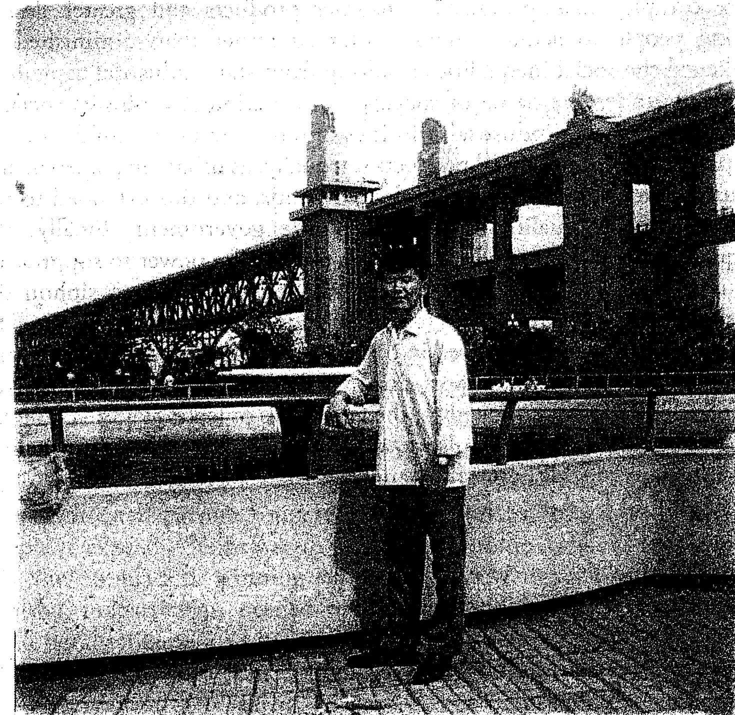

Figure 1.4. Shift in state consumerism. This photograph from 1975 captures the contending forces of social consumption and consumerism underlying state capitalism. On the one hand, the state wanted to limit consumer demand to reinvest in rapid production and promoted social consumption (in the background is an icon of social consumption of the late Mao era, the Nanjing River Bridge). On the other hand, as production increased, the state needed domestic consumers to want and acquire more mass products. The subject photographed here had recently upgraded his less expensive, less fashionable local Zhongshan brand watch to a new Guangzhou brand, one of many new brands of watches entering the market in the early 1970s. To earn the money needed, he had worked in an unauthorized factory and saved for half a year. The nicer watch gave him a sense of pride and accomplishment: "it showed that I had a job, could support myself, and could even afford to buy something nice." Source: The private collection of Xi Chen and interview by the same.

than focus on social transformation, the state tolerated corruption, back-door trading, and the creation of new brand-based social hierarchies as long as they contributed to further accumulation. Furthermore, the spread of

more complex mass-produced consumer products and greater desires among people to acquire them reinforced rather than diminished or weakened the social inequalities resulting from state industrial capitalism operating under the name of socialist construction. Despite its socialist rhetoric, the party's industrial priorities of rapid capital accumulation led the party to distribute social products unequally, as urban, managerial, and industrial workers received more desired goods, and this extended to the "three major inequalities" targeted by the government. Finally, the inequalities were reinforced through the use of state power to suppress all forms of consumption – even eating and housing – and to siphon the surplus from the countryside to further subsidize industrial capitalism. The everyday technologies discussed in this chapter reflected the more conspicuous and urgent forms of competition over the big technologies that will be discussed in Chapter 2. Together, the two forms of technological competition contributed to a compulsory self-expansion of industrial capitalism and consumerism, all under the banner of Maoist socialism.