

# UNENDING CAPITALISM

*How Consumerism Negated China's Communist  
Revolution*

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## CHAPTER 7

*The Mao Badge Phenomenon as Consumer Fad*

Beyond purging the bourgeois and feudal elements from Chinese society, a primary goal of the Cultural Revolution was to inculcate Chinese youth with revolutionary socialist cultural values. The movement's leading proponent, Mao Zedong, saw youth as a critical tool to combat what he saw as the growing rise of a capitalist-style bureaucracy within the Chinese state. More specifically, Mao worried that members of the bureaucracy, with their power to appropriate and distribute the surplus, were becoming invested in preserving the higher status and better lifestyles that came with such power. In short, the institutional arrangements of state capitalism were creating the equivalent of the bourgeoisie class in a market capitalist country. To counteract this growing internal threat to the party's revolutionary goals, Mao turned to the younger generation. In 1965 Mao told American reporter Edgar Snow that he envisioned that these young people, who had not been schooled in revolutionary principles as part of the earlier revolutionary struggles, had the potential either to advance the "continued development of the revolution toward communism" or to "negate the revolution and do bad things."<sup>1</sup> Based on his endorsement and encouragement, Mao endeavored to enlist the Red Guards by inculcating in them the values necessary to fulfill the promise of the Communist Revolution.

During the early years of the Cultural Revolution decade, Mao and the other leaders of the party set out to inspire and reinforce these ideals among the young through activities such as those described in the Chapter 6, including attending huge rallies, engaging in revolutionary activities, and displaying their revolutionary ardor by wearing military-style clothing or owning copies of Mao's writings. Although less well known outside of China than the *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, one of the powerful totems of revolutionary identity during the early years of the Cultural Revolution decade was the Mao badge. These badges, which sported images of Mao and sometimes revolutionary slogans attributed to him,

rose to prominence after the first of the mass rallies in Tiananmen Square on August 18, 1966.<sup>2</sup> Soon, tens of millions of Red Guards nationwide aspired to attend such a rally, catch a glimpse of Mao, declare their commitment to Mao and the Revolution, and bring home a Mao badge as proof of their visit.

As this chapter will show, the symbolic and social value these badges created for their owners soon provoked a wave of material desire that propelled the production, distribution, and accumulation of billions of badges across the country and the globe.<sup>3</sup> Although this Mao badge fad, like the larger Cultural Revolution of which it was a particularly visible part, was initiated by the state to achieve what it perceived to be an urgent political goal, it also provides a prime example of the self-expanding and compulsive nature of consumerism.<sup>4</sup> The mania for Mao badges reflected the three central attributes of industrial consumerism – being largely mass produced, endlessly exchanged and discussed, and worn to communicate identities and social standing. But the badge fad also shared features with consumer fads everywhere. Fads are an intensified form of fashion: they emerge suddenly, are embraced with great passion, quickly move from a small subsection of society to broad participation, and then end almost as suddenly as they begin.<sup>5</sup> Fads are usually inexpensive and easy to join, encouraging participation and emulation, and producing an initial burst of public enthusiasm in which demand outstrips supply, often leading people to resort to extreme actions in order to participate. As such fads develop, they tend to induce a desire that becomes completely abstract from the initial use or social value of that product, creating new hierarchies of belonging and difference.

As Mao surveyed the throngs of adoring teenagers who swarmed Beijing in the late summer of 1966, little could he have imagined that the mobilization of these young protagonists during the Cultural Revolution would help spread the exact values it was intended to counteract. Although the sentiments shouted by the Red Guards in Tiananmen Square and throughout the country appeared to manifest Mao's fondest hopes for their generation, the mania for Mao badges provides further and compelling evidence of how everyday actions served to further the practices of consumerism and the negation of the Communist Revolution.

**State Origins of the Badge Fad**

As is typical of fads, the vast majority of Mao badges were produced within a very short period of time, beginning in the opening months of the

Cultural Revolution in 1966–7, reaching a peak around the Ninth National Congress of the party in April 1969, and promptly declining after June 1969. Although the fad sprang up in various places across the country, its first movers were high-ranking cadres who obtained Mao badges through state production and distribution channels that were activated to create and spread the fashion. By mid-October 1966, only two months after the first Red Guard rally in Beijing, high-ranking cadres, including Marshal Lin Biao and Premier Zhou Enlai, appeared in public, and in newspaper images circulated across China, wearing Mao badges on their jackets. The fashion spread further as government officials began giving Mao badges as gifts to visitors to the capital, as when Zhou presented a delegation of students from Xinjiang with 10,000 badges to take back home to use as gifts.<sup>6</sup> Within months, the fad was well underway, and cadres at all levels of government proudly put on their Mao badges.<sup>7</sup>

The fad's spread and diversification over such a short period of time was due in part to the state's prior history of developing and promoting badges. The party had created the first badges with images of Mao in the 1930s, decades before the Tiananmen rallies, and they had become part of the original Mao cult in the 1940s.<sup>8</sup> These badges served as medals awarded for meritorious service or to commemorate important events, such as completion of public works or construction projects. These initial badges were produced in small quantities and presented to and worn by select and distinguished groups of people. Rather than featuring images of only Mao, they sometimes portrayed Mao alongside other national heroes, including the writer Lu Xun, General Zhu De, and Marshal Lin Biao. Following the establishment of the People's Republic, private companies began commercializing the image of Mao and sometimes complemented state-sponsored and individual badge production and distribution with high-quality luxury items commercially produced for special occasions. In 1950, for instance, the Shanghai stationery store Lao Feng Xiang produced a small number of 22 karat gold Mao badges to commemorate the new government, providing another example of an upper-class store attempting to reinvent itself by embracing the new order, while commercializing socialistic fashions. At the time, however, the vast majority of badges were still produced by the state for official purposes. In 1951, delegates to the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, for instance, received bronze badges as part of the government's Resist America and Aid Korea campaign.<sup>9</sup>

Before long, other segments of the population also desired Mao badges. Some started to create their own badges, such as Chinese soldiers fighting

in the Vietnam War in the early 1960s who fashioned badges from scrap metal from downed US planes.<sup>10</sup> According to a 1967 article in the *People's Daily*, a Beijing factory worker, Tian Zhihai, created the Mao badges that sparked the fad in August 1966. Tian made molds for products such as the good-luck charms worn by newborn babies, and spent eight arduous months using images of Mao printed in the *People's Daily* to produce an acceptable Mao badge. The new product was an immediate hit with the factory's customers, and as the fad took hold, the factory shared its molds with other producers around the country, helping accelerate nationwide production. Due to the rapid capital accumulation and industrial investment of the 1950s, the state already had in place machinery to promote the fad, to expand production, to meet consumer demand, and, in the process, to earn money for a state factory.<sup>11</sup>

A primary early sponsor of the badge fad was the mobilization of an actual army of consumers. When Marshal Lin Biao took charge of the PLA in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward, he promoted Mao badges as an expression of loyalty within the larger Mao cult.<sup>12</sup> In May 1967, front-page articles in national newspapers celebrated Lin's decision to issue all PLA personnel with a set of two badges – one in the shape of a star with Mao's image at its center and a rectangular one, beneath which was printed the socialist slogan "Serve the People," rendered in Mao's calligraphy.<sup>13</sup> "Serve the People" was the title of a speech Mao had given in honor of a fallen soldier and it encapsulated the premise upon which Chinese state capitalism was based – the self-sacrifice of diligent workers and frugal consumers for the collective good of the people and the nation.<sup>14</sup> In a political economy that continued to spread capitalism, it is a predictable contradiction that this original badge, with its slogan implicitly valorizing consumer frugality, became a valuable and widely desired badge.<sup>15</sup>

Officials used the resources of state capitalism and state consumerism to further mobilize the reserve army of consumers through direct efforts to stimulate and fulfill popular demand, notably by lowering badge prices and increasing production. The Ministry of Finance awarded special Cultural Revolution tax breaks to factories that produced revolutionary products, including badges. On August 27, 1966, less than two weeks after the first mass rally, the National Price Committee of the State Council issued a directive that required stores across the country to maintain low prices on all Mao-related products, including posters, sculptures, Mao's poems and calligraphy, picture frames, and, of course, badges. These price cuts applied to ink blocks and calligraphy brushes, presumably to encourage the



among their respective work units or to trade for other things.<sup>25</sup> In any case, evidence points to enormous quantities of both authorized and unauthorized badges produced by state work units. At the fad's height in 1969, over 20,000 "factories," most of them unauthorized, were producing Mao badges, illustrating the ability of state consumerism to mobilize enormous material desire and not exclusively promote hard work and frugal living.<sup>26</sup> Across China, work units, both large and small, were redirecting state-allocated resources to the making of Mao badges. In the northeast city of Dalian, for instance, even Rising Sun Store, the smallest commercial work unit in the city, made its own badges, as did workers at Route 5 Bus Station, the smallest public transport work unit in Beijing, and at the party branch of Shenyang Glass Measurement Device Factory, the smallest work unit in that city.<sup>27</sup>

The unauthorized production and distribution of Mao badges meant that the state was unable to maintain a monopoly over the allocation of capital or profits reaped from the sale of badges. Unauthorized producers exchanged their Mao badges on gray markets and even in the open, bartering them with other work units or distributing them within their own work units without official permission. Authorized producers, too, often engaged in unauthorized distribution. A blogger using the pseudonym Mo Ren, for example, recalled that as a young student in 1967 his father's friend took him to visit one of the best badge factories in Wuhan, where he received samples of all the badges that the factory had made as well as samples of those it had exchanged with other manufacturers.<sup>28</sup> Numerous anecdotes from across the country reveal how such activities undermined state capitalist control over the economy, and even seemingly minor misallocations of state resources came at the expense of other state goals.

The individual production and personalization of badges further undermined state capitalism by reallocating labor and material resources away from their intended destinations. As the Cultural Revolution led to the suspension of classes and high unemployment among young people, many had plenty of time for other activities, including do-it-yourself badge production. A youngster in Wuhan, for instance, accompanied his uncle to his work unit, a local engineering school, where they used school equipment to churn out bare metal badges that the young boy then hand-painted at home, creating what he claimed were "the best badges in town."<sup>29</sup> Some reports describe people obtaining semi-finished badges on the gray market and then finishing them with oil paint and adhesive in their spare time or during their state-run training classes.<sup>30</sup>

Although cadres may have encouraged DIY production by young people or having work unit members make badges together, the badge fad redirected state resources and labor into private badge production far beyond any official authorization. People making badges in the Sanming region of Fujian province, for instance, repurposed hospital syringes to customize badges because the syringes were sharp enough to inject paint onto the delicate badge surfaces. Individuals making their own badges found that they could create badges with higher exchange and social values by stealing unfinished badges from their workplaces and then applying unique colors. Many work units and factories that wanted their own badges obtained unpainted ones from manufacturers and painted them themselves during work hours. Such practices also extended to the state bureaucracy. Some revolutionary committee members considered badge production and distribution so compelling that they used their own work time to paint, dry, and distribute badges, donning the badges they had made as soon as they had finished drying.<sup>31</sup>

On the demand side, the badge fad began to expand at an uncontrollable rate. Whatever one's personal reason for wearing a badge, it indirectly added peer pressure for others to do the same, thereby expanding the use of consumption both to communicate an identity and to compete. Obtaining and wearing a Mao badge served as protection from the Red Guards, who used badges to signal their inclusion in the privileged class of the revolutionary vanguard. Even non-diehard realized the social and exchange values of the badges. As the compulsion to acquire badges increased, it led to intense competition to acquire new badges, with sometimes drastic real-world consequences. Politically, beyond insulating oneself from possible Red Guard attacks, wearing a badge could be a useful way to advance one's social standing. Prior to the badge fad, demonstrating loyalty to the party had already become a critical and competitive criterion for membership in party youth organizations that could lead to full party membership and all its social and economic benefits. The competitive nature of upward mobility in New China indirectly contributed to young people's endless demand for badges.

Collecting and displaying the latest, best, and biggest Mao badges was both a political strategy and a small but visible strategy for social and economic advancement. As sociologist Joel Andreas notes, after the elimination of private ownership over the means of production during the Socialist Transformation, a new ruling class gradually appeared, based on the remaining two forms of capital – cultural capital derived from education and political capital based on one's relationship to the

party and state. Social advancement largely depended on these cultural and political forms of capital. Moreover, the educational path to gaining cultural capital was more difficult so that many more Chinese youth sought to acquire political capital by joining the party. For the politically mobile, the easiest way to attain party membership was to advance through the various levels of party-run organizations. Given that the rewards of party membership were great and the alternatives for class advancement limited, the process was highly competitive. Nearly all children between the ages of six and fourteen were members of the Young Pioneers (often called Red Scarves, as they used the wearing of such a scarf to signal membership), but only 20 percent of teenagers and young adults advanced from the Young Pioneers to membership in the Communist Youth League. Of these 20 percent, only 5 percent of the adult population reached the brass ring of party membership, along with the positive job prospects and status that accompanied such membership.<sup>32</sup> In the highly competitive world of political maneuvering, prospective cadres seized every means available to distinguish themselves from their peers.

### The Expanding Meanings and Uses of Badges

But beyond one's particular social standing, Mao badges became a way to differentiate oneself through the connoisseurship and possession of material goods – quite the opposite of the goals of the Cultural Revolution – and to signal one's relative wealth and connections. Just as the acquisition of the Three Great Things discussed in Chapter 1 demonstrated one's competence in acquiring difficult-to-obtain items under an economy of planned consumer shortages, displaying a rare badge showed that one could thrive in an environment in which distribution relied on more than money. Displaying a sophisticated knowledge of both badges and the Three Great Things became markers of class and social standing. For example, showing (and showing off) one's collection and the relative value of badges became popular topics of conversation and social activity. Badges possessed varying local values. People sent badges to friends and relatives in other parts of the country knowing that their badges would be more valuable in other places.<sup>33</sup> Qing Cha, the pseudonym of a blogger, recalls his parents collecting Mao badges when he was a child, a very popular pastime that provided an opportunity for people to “compare and brag about the quality and number in their collections.” When guests came over, his parents would display their badges and occasionally make trades.<sup>34</sup> These everyday acts of

sociability – displaying, handling, and exchanging badges with friends or relatives – further increased people's awareness of and desire for badges.

As the fad progressed, people further instrumentalized badges as bribes and gifts, highlighting the gray economy that operated alongside the formal state economy. People collected, traded, and gave badges away to curry favor across all levels of society. Arguably, badges became more useful than cash for everyday bribes, as one still needed the appropriate ration coupons to buy things with cash and in places short on goods and cash that relied on barter economies. In the hierarchy of items used to bribe someone or to build connections, badges were sometimes more effective and desirable than cigarettes or alcohol. Red Guard memoirs recount incidents when badges facilitated bribes or favors. While demanding cash was considered politically unacceptable behavior, requesting a badge for a favor minimized the risks of such behavior, particularly in the charged political environment that attacked anything and everything that smacked of “capitalism.” Former Red Guard Ken Ling recalls accepting badges rather than cash in exchange for giving strangers bicycle rides during one of the Red Guard marches, then trading one of those badges for a truck ride: “The drivers did not dare openly ask money from us, for fear that we would take down their license numbers and report them . . . Instead, they asked for Mao badges, which they could trade on the black market.”<sup>35</sup>

At times, people substituted badges for cash. Someone going to a park, for instance, might give the sales booth a low-end Mao badge rather than buy an admission ticket. If caught on a train without a ticket, a person might try to give the conductor a Mao badge as a substitute.<sup>36</sup> Some students and factory workers used badges to gamble when playing cards or chess.<sup>37</sup> In short, badge transactions became ordinary occurrences, their utility further sustaining the fad and the consumerism it generated. People speculated on the increasing value of badges by collecting dozens, hundreds, and perhaps thousands, hoarding them like the proverbial miser hoards gold. The ubiquity of trade in badges again highlights how even the vitriolic attacks on capitalist tendencies during this period masked the underlying capitalist institutional arrangements of the economic and political structures of the PRC. Labor did not cease to be commodified but was paid for in an alternate currency.

If every Mao badge had been identical, the fad may well have faded sooner – or not taken on the qualities of a fad in the first place. Instead, the ever-expanding range of place brands, styles, and quality of badges led to a “badge inflation,” similar to that seen with other desirable consumer goods, such as the compulsion to replace still-working watches with more

fashionable watches. Millions of people similarly felt compelled to upgrade to more fashionable badges as the ones they owned fell from favor or to expand their collections to demonstrate their sophisticated and discriminating knowledge of available options. In the badge economy, as in all similar consumer fads, a small or ordinary badge might have been desirable when the fad began, but over time one sought more unusual or bigger badges to communicate the same level of status. As badge possession became more widespread, the complex, fluid hierarchy of badge values further fueled competitive and conspicuous consumption as badge owners tried to distinguish themselves from their peers by having more fashionable badges. The explosion of these fad-driven consumption patterns continually undermined state capitalism and state consumerism and contributed to the shift along the state-to-private spectrum toward a more market-based variety of capitalism and consumerism.

The endless variety of badges that was eventually produced – tens of thousands of different badges – can still be seen in the numerous books and websites produced by the vast community of badge collectors that re-emerged after Mao's death.<sup>38</sup> Then, as now, subtle differences among badges led to different valuations, and some badges were trendier or more valuable than others.<sup>39</sup> Although the state ostensibly created Mao badges to increase ideological fervor, the badge fad, which replicated the consumerist effect of branding, demonstrates the self-expanding nature of consumerism. As the fad took on a life of its own, both the social value and the exchange value of badges came to be determined along four main axes: political meaning, relative rarity, material differences, and size.

Among these, badges first varied in their social value of communicating their loyalty to Mao and the Revolution (and therefore also their potential exchange value) based on their political messages and implications. Badges often included a revolutionary slogan other than "Serve the People," such as "It is right to rebel" and "May Chairman Mao Live Forever." The backs of badges typically included the name of a work unit, a commemorative reason for the badge's production, and a date and place of manufacture, all of which created a branding-like effect and in turn made a badge more exclusive and therefore more valuable to collectors.<sup>40</sup> According to the memoirs of Red Guards, badges from places associated with Mao, especially his birthplace, were among the particularly desirable. Likewise, people valued some visual symbols more than others, such as the character for "loyalty," which could appear on the front or the back; the image of a sunflower, a symbol of devotion; or a mango, a symbol of Mao's benevolence.<sup>41</sup> In Beijing, the most popular Mao badge was the original

two-piece badge set made specifically for the General Political Department of the PLA, which people valued so highly that, according to one source, a few dozen could be traded for a high-end brand of bicycle such as a Flying Pigeon.<sup>42</sup>

A second axis of value was availability, and like any limited-edition product, badges made in very small quantities became extremely valuable and desired. The coveted Shaoshan Mao badge, featuring an illustration of Mao's former house in the village of Shaoshanchong in its background, was so rare that only four could be swapped for a Flying Pigeon bicycle.<sup>43</sup> Besides a genuine desire to pay respect to Mao at his birthplace – that is, the ostensible purpose of the badge – the exchange value of the badges obtained from Shaoshan helped entice more Red Guards to visit. Yao Xiaoping and his classmates, for instance, were so delighted to discover during their pilgrimage that each visitor to Mao's natal village house received a set of four souvenir badges that they visited the house multiple times, enduring six-hour queues each time.<sup>44</sup> The seeming motivation behind their repeated trips was not to pay their respect or to study the central message of anti-bourgeois consumerism and anti-capitalism underlying Mao's Cultural Revolution, but to convert their labor (waiting in line) into more useful badge capital.

Private and local uses of a wide variety of materials constituted a third axis of differentiation among badges and badge values. Although plated aluminum was the most used, Mao badges were also made from gold, silver, bronze, stainless steel, tin, and practically every other metal, including lead, aluminum foil, and even artillery shell casings.<sup>45</sup> Work units with access to other materials, such as iron, enamel, and plastic, often reallocated such materials to unauthorized badge production or adopted other local materials, including bamboo, ceramic, wood, bone, marble, glass, and cardboard. By 1968, porcelain badges created in Jingdezhen, the producer of imperial porcelain, began to appear. Although people considered badges made from more expensive materials more desirable, both for their prestige and their rarity, collectors sought to include badges made of a variety of materials in their collections.<sup>46</sup>

But the most visible (or at least most symbolic) sign of badge inflation was the growing size of the badges themselves, which soon grew from under a half-inch to as large as a dinner plate. As Jicai Feng recalls, in part "the larger they were, the more loyal the wearer supposedly was – and certainly the more startlingly visible they were." But, as he admits, much of their allure was that "all in all, these badges were the newest, largest, and most fashionable of their kind at the time."<sup>47</sup> Size became so valuable that



Figure 7.2. A self-expanding badge fad. Mao badges not only grew in size but also, similar to the production of other consumer goods, in complexity. The size expanded from the modest badge on the left, through the medium-sized one in the middle (with the character for “loyalty” 忠 written at the bottom), to the final image with Mao hovering above the entrance to the Forbidden City, the traditional seat of power.

smaller badges were recycled to make larger and more visible badges. Despite numerous accounts of people fearing that inappropriately handling an object with Mao’s image would be considered a sign of disrespect or, worse, dissent during the Cultural Revolution, smaller images of Mao were willingly destroyed to make larger, more fashionable, and more valuable ones (Figure 7.2).<sup>48</sup>

### The Great (Badge) Exchange

A further example of the unintended consequences of the state-directed attempt to inculcate revolutionary values in the younger generation is another contradictory but largely unstudied event during the Cultural Revolution: the Great Exchange of Revolutionary Experiences. The Great Exchange program, initiated shortly after the first rally in Tiananmen Square, authorized free travel for millions of students to and from Beijing and other revolutionary sites across the country to attend

political rallies to raise their revolutionary consciousness.<sup>49</sup> In what in effect was a major state reallocation of resources away from a strict focus on industrialization to the political goal of inculcating socialist values, the state ordered that the national transportation network of trains, trucks, and ships provide free transportation and local governments offer free room and board for tens of millions of teenagers. Predictably, the costs to the economy were enormous. In 1966, the massive increase in passenger transport displaced an estimated ten million tons of goods and materials, such as coal, timber, steel, and building products, negatively affecting factory production and capital construction.<sup>50</sup> As a result, it did not take long for the industrialization priorities of the state to reassert themselves over the secondary goal of spreading socialist culture. The program was terminated after only a few months. During its existence, however, the program profoundly affected the spread of the badge fad and of consumerism more broadly.<sup>51</sup>

The stated goal of the Great Exchange was to provide the post-revolutionary generation of students – those same students Mao worried would gradually negate the revolution – with a firsthand appreciation of the results of the Communist Revolution and the sacrifices of its participants. The Great Exchange was also intended to motivate Red Guards to spread the Cultural Revolution to communities throughout the country where local cadres may have been blocking its implementation. Students, few of whom had traveled beyond their hometowns, found the offer of free travel and political engagement an irresistible opportunity, and in the following months, Red Guards and other youngsters from across China flocked to Beijing hoping to glimpse Mao in person, prompting the Chairman to hold an additional seven rallies. By November 20, 1966, when the state finally suspended the free travel opportunity, some ten million students, and also sometimes their teachers, had visited Beijing – so many that the capital had to erect a tent city on the grounds of the Temple of Heaven to house 400,000 visitors at a time. But Beijing was only one destination in this massive field trip: in total, the central government organized 4,000 reception points at and along the way to places with special significance to the history of the Communist Revolution and the lives of its major figures.

The Great Exchange met many of its political goals. As one historian of the Mao cult notes, the Great Exchange “more than any other factor contributed to the spreading of the Mao cult and the nation-wide attacks against old culture.”<sup>52</sup> At the same time, however, the program undermined state capitalism by diverting resources from the state’s industrial



priorities and by unleashing millions of Red Guards across the county, thereby also expanding the reach of the Mao badge fad and the demand for additional reallocations of capital into badge production and accumulation. Although the rallies in Tiananmen Square were the most popular destination for acquiring authorized badges, students also flocked to spots along the more than 5,000-mile Long March and other "sacred places of the revolution," many in rural locations, collecting badges at each stop on their pilgrimage. Tens of thousands visited the significant sites daily, such as Mao's birthplace at Shaoshan in rural Hunan province, where so many students arrived that the local badge factory could not meet demand and the state had to set up a special resupply network to meet the extra demand, as badges were flown in daily from Shanghai to Changsha and then trucked to Shaoshan.<sup>53</sup>

Whatever success the program may have had in spreading revolutionary values or destroying the "old culture," the student participants also embraced the Great Exchange program as an opportunity to engage in some of the very activities under attack during the Cultural Revolution, including shopping and tourism. The Great Exchange consequently introduced forms of consumerism and associated behavior already popular in Shanghai and other big cities to millions of rural teenagers who otherwise would not have had the resources or opportunities to travel to such places.<sup>54</sup> In addition to providing the traveling students with a chance to collect badges at various revolutionary sites, the program exposed them to a wider range of badges worn by other students as informal markets and badge exchanges sprang up in gathering spots, such as train stations and even at the revolutionary sites the state encouraged them to visit.

Red Guards from smaller cities and towns soon learned to emulate their big-city counterparts not only by wearing Mao badges but also by trading them illicitly. A typical story is that of Gao Yuan, who acquired his first two badges while on a Great Exchange pilgrimage to Beijing. Among the trees in a pine grove on the south side of Tiananmen Square, he reported, "we discovered a brisk trade in Chairman Mao badges. [...] I inquired whether anyone would sell me a badge. 'We are not speculators,' said one boy. 'We only trade. Two small ones for a big one.'" Gao did not have any badges to trade, but the boys had a work-around, agreeing to trade ten photos of Mao for one badge. Gao quickly bought two packets of Mao photos and swapped them for the badges: "I pinned one on my chest and the other inside my pocket. I was sure I could feel Chairman Mao's radiance burning into me."<sup>55</sup> The contradiction of using a market to satisfy desires at the height of the Cultural Revolution was lost on both Gao and the badge

barterers, whose complex motivations and political ardor became instrumentalized or converted into material desires.

According to dozens of accounts by Great Exchange participants, the badges distributed at significant revolutionary places further incentivized students to travel, creating a feedback loop in which more travel generated a desire for more badges. In his memoirs of his days as a Red Guard from Changsha, for instance, Liang Heng recounts admiring a beautiful badge, larger than any he had seen, worn by a cousin. When the cousin informed him that he had been given the badge during a school trip to Shaoshan, Liang Heng "resolved that someday I would go too, even if I had to walk there."<sup>56</sup> The difficulty of collecting badges from distant or hard-to-reach places also increased the social value of such badges and made students more eager to travel to such places or to obtain them from other collectors.<sup>57</sup>

Through the Great Exchange, the state provided the most inexpensive and readily available way to learn to desire the right badges and, perhaps, to build a diverse and valuable collection of badges. In October 1966, Yao Xiaoping and his classmates, like millions of students from across China, took advantage of the program to visit places such as Wuhan, Guangzhou, and Changsha, where, judging from their accounts, they learned more about the tremendous diversity of badges than about revolutionary history. In Guangzhou, they visited the twentieth annual Chinese Export Trade Fair (also known as the Canton Fair), which was underway despite Cultural Revolution denunciations of capitalism (Figure 7.3). Reflecting earlier forms of socialist propaganda, the main hall was filled with images of Mao and banners containing Mao slogans, and Yao recalled that a top attraction at the fair was a grand glass case displaying a beautiful collection of Mao badges.<sup>58</sup> They could look but could not buy. According to another account, although visitors needed a ticket to gain admission to the fair and the products on display were sold only to foreigners, locals used personal contacts with businesspeople from Hong Kong and Macau to buy badges on their behalf.<sup>59</sup>

The lure of the badges was powerful enough that local officials eventually used them to encourage student tourists to leave the cities. In Shanghai, when a large number of Great Exchange visitors who had flooded into the city lingered after the state suspended the program and ordered the visitors to return home, local officials enticed students to depart by issuing them with highly prized special Mao badges as they checked out of their campus accommodations or produced train tickets proving their impending departure.<sup>60</sup> The practice was so effective that



Figure 7.3. Trading in revolution. Although wary of trade with market capitalist countries, the party needed to export products to pay for technology and food imports. Even during the height of the Cultural Revolution, the Canton Trade Fair continued, albeit with socialistic cover in the form of banners covering the exterior that included, on either side of the Mao portrait, “Long Live the Great Leader Chairman Mao” and “Long Live the Great Chinese Communist Party.” The poster on the right (behind the bus) reads: “Following Mao Zedong, the whole world turns red.” Meanwhile, inside this same fair in 1968, organizers sold over 230,000 badges. Source: 中国出口商品交易会 (Chinese Export Commodities Fair) published as a supplement to *Jingji daobao*, April 15, 1968: 38.

when local Shanghai factories began to run out of raw materials for badge production in December 1966, the Shanghai office responsible for distributing badges gave first priority to providing badges to visiting students who were voluntarily departing.<sup>61</sup>

The Great Exchange thus unwittingly negated its own goals by turning students into collectors and tourists, promoting consumerism along with the socialist values that Mao had hoped to inculcate. For millions of Chinese youth, the Great Exchange provided, as officials had hoped, an opportunity to swap “revolutionary experiences” and engage in mass politics. It also gave them an opportunity to tour the country and participate in consumer fads, along the way learning about new dimensions of the fad from fellow exchange students. Just as many memoirs of Mao-era China provide vivid tales of learning about and eventually acquiring the Three Great Things discussed in Chapter 1, many memoirists writing about the start of the Cultural Revolution include stories of badge acquisition and trading. As Chinese youth and others supposedly were building socialism, they were also building their badge collections (Figure 7.4).

### State Crackdown

Whereas many Chinese wanted badges for their stated and obvious purpose – to communicate a personal loyalty to Mao and the party and fervor for the revolution – the fact that they did so through consumption (rather than, say, through quiet reflection) again demonstrates the persistence and expansion of consumer culture throughout the Mao era. Badges, unlike the omnipresent posters and other representations of Mao, gave wearers an individual connection to Mao and an opportunity for personal expression, especially when the wearers made their own badges, or what Red Guard Liang Heng describes as “national symbols of fervor and sincerity.”<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, even at the very height of the Cultural Revolution, these expressions of patriotic fervor and party loyalty undermined the stated purpose of the Cultural Revolution and, indeed, the larger Communist Revolution that the Red Guards claimed to be advancing.

Eventually, government officials, including Mao himself, realized that the Mao cult in general and the badge fad in particular had grown out of hand and had become the opposite of the ethos of hard work and frugal living. Whatever political power they had provided was eventually offset by the costs in terms of material and labor and the growing evidence that the fad was reproducing the exact “feudal” and “capitalist” cultural manifestations



Figure 7.4. Class photo. In the Beijing Middle School #101 graduation photo (the Chinese at the top is a line from a poem frequently used on such occasions), most students wear badges, and some also wear Red Guard armbands. By 1970, most urban households would have had a collection of badges to choose from for these formal occasions. Many, including Hu Yafei (third from the right in the middle row), chose a porcelain badge. Source: Yafei Hu and L. James Hammond, "My Youth in China" (2017). Used with permission.

that the Cultural Revolution intended to eliminate. Mao's own personal misgivings, as well as the depth and breadth of the desire to own and display badges, are demonstrated by an incident recalled by Xie Jingyi, one of Mao's confidential secretaries. According to Xie, she and other staff around Mao had joined in the mania for collecting badges, and in late 1967, she decided to show her collection to Mao. When Xie explained that everyone had badges and that many had much larger collections than hers, "Mao's face immediately turned serious. I knew he was unhappy; I never saw this expression. I became nervous and closed the badge album." Mao, likening collecting badges to the now banned-as-bourgeois hobby of collecting stamps, proclaimed, "Good grief, this is extremely wasteful!" When Mao asked her to hand over her album, however, she refused: "What if you throw them away? I have been collecting them for a long time and take good care of them." Xie's collection had become so meaningful to her that she was willing to defy Mao in an act that clearly did not demonstrate loyalty to him or to his vision

for China. Nonetheless, Xie saw Mao's reaction as the beginning of the end of the fad.<sup>63</sup>

The growing recognition of the counterrevolutionary effects of the badge fad was further fueled by the increasing visibility of and complaints about the gray and black markets that developed to trade badges. These illicit markets, much like those that developed to provide wider access to the Three Greats, demonstrate the difficulty of reining in the forces of consumerism once they had been set in motion. Despite government attempts to keep Mao badges outside of the marketplace, as the fad grew, numerous and increasingly brazen illicit gray and black markets trading in badges developed across China. Because markets and engaging in trade were labeled capitalist and hence were disrespectful, people referred to the places where one could buy or swap badges by the euphemism "exchanges." These exchanges were a consequence of both the growing supply and the insistent consumer demand. As billions of badges circulated across China, many people had superfluous badges that they wanted to sell or to trade for other badges to fill out their collections. Furthermore, the failure of state capitalism to control production had led to unregulated, decentralized badge production and countless poor-quality products with awkward patterns and shapes or poor likenesses of Mao (or, worse, likenesses that looked more like the primary Cultural Revolution target Liu Shaoqi). The low quality of badges available through state-sanctioned channels led many people to look outside the state distribution system to acquire more desirable badges, much like they looked for other consumer products in the early 1960s. As the desire for badges grew more intense, people began to look beyond their natural informal exchange circles of friends, relatives, and colleagues, resorting to trading with complete strangers if need be. The badge trade thus exemplifies the limits of state capitalism and consumerism in the 1960s – the more the state attempted to restrict badge supply through formal state channels, the more it incentivized people to engage in the illicit buying and selling of goods and services.

Badge markets sprang up in the very center of the capital. Two of Beijing's three main commercial areas, Wangfujing and Xidan, featured markets where badge exchanges took place each morning.<sup>64</sup> The largest black market was located just outside Tiananmen Square, the site of the massive Red Guard rallies that had launched the Cultural Revolution. There some traders operated openly, while others were more discreet, pinning badges to the inside of their jackets or coats and revealing only a few badges at a time to potential customers. Rumor had it that Ye Qun

(wife of Marshal Lin Biao, Mao's presumptive successor) was a keen collector not only of the antiques and other banned goods noted in the Chapter 6, but also of badges, and she frequently disguised herself and went to the market in search of the latest variations.<sup>65</sup>

In a further demonstration of the self-expanding nature of capitalism in the Mao era, innumerable people participated in such markets by exchanging badges and trading them for cash, banned books, and ordinary items such as light bulbs and eggs.<sup>66</sup> According to newspaper reports, one teenager who wanted pocket money sold more than 2,000 badges within three days and had another 969 badges in his possession when he was apprehended.<sup>67</sup> Writer Chang Jung recalled that her thirteen-year-old brother collected Mao badges to fund his purchase of banned books on the gray market.<sup>68</sup> At these markets, enterprising students looking for a source of income sold newsletters originally intended for restricted cadre audiences and traded them for badges.<sup>69</sup> Although the best-known gray and black markets were in cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, other cities had less conspicuous markets. Peter Zhou, who was twelve in 1966, later remembered that such markets had formed in various districts of Wuhan and that "people found lots of pleasure in swapping the badges and bragging about their collections."<sup>70</sup>

Eventually, however, the conspicuousness of these exchanges caught the attention of officials, who declared that turning Mao's image in the form of badges into a commercial product rather than a devotional object, as was the original intention, was disrespectful to Mao. The market was chaotic and egregious in Shanghai, the first place to have badge exchanges, where the number of illegal badge exchanges grew from twelve to thirty-five in only a few months in the spring of 1967.<sup>71</sup> Officials in Shanghai consequently ordered undercover police, Red Guards, and workers to patrol the area and search for speculators. As early as January 1967, some members of the Shanghai workers revolutionary rebel corps and of the Red Guards formed a group to attack the growing number of badge exchanges, although they lacked the strength and authority to suppress them on their own. Soon, however, a public campaign claiming that these markets were evidence of capitalism and its participants were class enemies for engaging in capitalist behavior was launched.<sup>72</sup> A letter from the rebel corps of the Shanghai Industrial and Commercial Administrative Bureau published in *Liberation Daily* on February 12, 1967, waved away participants' claims that market-goers were merely promoting the noble goals of "building friendships" and "expressing devotion" to Chairman Mao by "exchanging" badges as excuses for buying and selling badges. The article

charged that the exchanges were forms of capitalism where "counterrevolutionary activities are conducted in the name of the revolution" and they were clear evidence that "an intensive, complicated class struggle exists."<sup>73</sup> After publication of the rebel corps' letter, the local political leadership united under the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee (SRC), which included representatives of the PLA, and took a series of countermeasures against the illegal production, distribution, sales, and purchase of Mao badges, targeting the exchanges as egregious attempts at "capitalist restoration."<sup>74</sup> On March 11, 1967, a "Notice on Banning Places of Exchange of Commemorative Badges, Strictly Managing the Production of Commemorative Badges" was jointly issued by the SRC's Grasp Revolution Promote Production Front Line Headquarters, the Shanghai Municipal Public Security Bureau, and the Shanghai Industry and Commerce Administrative Bureau. The notice was a cease-and-desist warning to all "illegal producers" who were illegally buying, reselling, and stealing badges. Henceforth, it declared, only the Shanghai Light Industry Bureau and the Handicraft Industry Bureau would have the authority to produce badges, and all others producing badges were ordered to surrender them. Ten days later, the SRC circulated a notice that forbade non-specialist producers – meaning unauthorized factories – from making badges and demanded that state-designated badge producers make badges only as authorized.<sup>75</sup>

Despite the concerted effort to stop or regulate the production and trade of badges, at the height of the fad the self-expanding and compulsive nature of consumerism appeared to prevail over the efforts by the Red Guards and the police. At least in Shanghai, the badge business – production and consumption – continued to flourish. During a crackdown on unauthorized producers within work units in the spring of 1967, policing forces seized some 416 badge molds, 466,000 unfinished badges, and more than 300 kilos of materials. Local governments cracked down on badge exchanges, with the police dealing with 14,769 people, including repeat offenders, and confiscating sixty-three molds and 91,301 badges.<sup>76</sup> Unfortunately for the policing forces, the problem of commercialized badges extended far beyond the existence of these markets or a few teenagers making or stealing badges in their spare time. Some powerful work units in cities such as Shanghai manufactured badges without authorization, making a crackdown much more complicated. The multifaceted approach that officials in Shanghai were forced to take to eliminate the entire chain linking badge producers, sellers, and consumers highlights both the difficulty of preventing the expansion of badge markets and their deep roots in Chinese society.

Policing forces could not fully suppress the markets – and the consumerism and private capitalism they represented – because the power and will to crack down on these activities varied across the country, and even within the state itself. Unauthorized badge production and circulation continued outside of Shanghai long after the crackdown had completed its work in the city.<sup>77</sup> This included within the military itself, which produced some of the best-quality badges, and the SRC lacked the authority to stop the practice. Although on paper it was easy to enlist the military's cooperation, in practice it proved much more difficult to stamp out this valuable source of side income. On May 5, 1967, the SRC invited the top officers stationed in Shanghai to a meeting with representatives from the Shanghai government offices overseeing the industry. Participants at the meeting agreed that military stationed within the city could manage production as it saw fit, but that military personnel from outside the city had to have the appropriate letters of authorization and production would be managed by the Shanghai Light Industry Bureau and the Handicraft Industry Bureau. This agreement, however, was unenforceable across the innumerable unauthorized work units making badges for the military, which continued to find ways to meet consumer demand. The Shanghai branch of the People's Bank of China reported, for instance, that in November 1967 an air force unit made 276 gold-plated badges without permission and, when it ran out of gold, it attempted to requisition more from the bank by claiming it was needed to manufacture plane components. Later investigations discovered that some of the original gold supplied by the PLA came from robbing graves.<sup>78</sup>

To meet demand, the state continued to set up large badge factories even as officials in Beijing began to question the scope of badge production. In early 1968, the Red Rebel Revolutionary Committee of Heilongjiang Province in Harbin, a major industrial city in northeast China, established a dedicated Mao badge factory, the Heilongjiang Badge Factory. The committee allocated impressive amounts of resources to the factory and production began apace. By April, the factory had eighty employees, including skilled craftsmen, a 32,000 square-foot factory floor, and advanced equipment transferred from other factories in the city. In a major improvement over smaller local badge factories, the new factory had strict quality control and destroyed any badges with scratches, bubbles in the paint, or unclear lettering. Once finished, workers placed the badges in specially made handmade boxes. The badges made by this factory supplied the special needs of the Provincial Revolutionary Committee,

which in January 1969, three months before the start of the Ninth National Congress of the CCP in April, ordered tribute badges from the factory to commemorate the congress. The factory made 30,000 badges and reserved 10,000 as gifts, although there were only some 1,500 delegates. The plan to present others with the best badges worked. Compared to other badges brought to the congress, which were deemed too numerous or too large, the Heilongjiang badges were a hit.<sup>79</sup> By investing time, labor, and resources into badge production, provincial leaders turned the desire of delegates for the nicest badges into symbolic capital that they could use down the road.

Even two months later, after the CCP Central Committee finally forbade further production and other factories stopped manufacturing badges, the Heilongjiang Badge Factory continued to make badges for another six months to meet the demand from officers and technicians working overseas who continued to order badges to give as gifts, including one final badge, inscribed with "The magnificent 1970s." Although the factory, which had grown to 130 workers, closed by the end of the year, it continued to produce badges until the overseas and domestic markets dried up, demonstrating that the pursuit of profits enabled by the fad operated at an institutional as well as an individual level.<sup>80</sup>

While officials in places such as Heilongjiang continued to use the means of production to fuel a consumer fad, some contemporary observers were becoming uncomfortable with it. Ordinary individuals to the Chairman himself had already begun to note the contradiction that the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was reproducing extreme versions of "feudal" and "bourgeois" culture. Some outraged opponents of the fad dared to express their doubts publicly. In April 1968, Jiang Mingliang, then a teenage student in Xi'an, wrote a letter to Mao and the CCP Central Committee complaining that the Cultural Revolution was turning China into a "society that promoted blind devotion" and comparing Mao-related "loyalty" activities and goods to those of a feudal cult.<sup>81</sup> Arguing that the badge fad and other aspects of the cult of personality around Mao were wasting, or at least misallocating, millions of RMB and materials that could have been used to build factories or planes, Jiang concluded that the current situation did not represent implementation of the slogan "Serve the People," but rather reflected the opposite values. Jiang was so enraged that he sent his letter to Mao and wrote it out on a thirty-five-page big-character poster that he pasted up on his campus. For pointing out these contradictions between the party's rhetoric of socialism and its actual policies, Jiang was jailed and beaten.<sup>82</sup>

Jiang was not alone. After graduating from a small-town high school in Mao's home province of Hunan, Xiao Ruiyi (b. 1948) became another letter writer who denounced the practices of the Cultural Revolution as negating its stated goals. Xiao wrote a 12,000-character-long letter to Chairman Mao in the late spring of 1968 expressing his disbelief at the manifestations of the Mao cult. According to Xiao, "Now everyone in the entire country, except the Chairman himself, has a Mao badge or Mao quotation plate, even top national leaders who work closely with the Chairman. But the Chairman does not put a stop to it. We honestly have a difficult time understanding why not." Citing many of the same kinds of evidence also noted by Jiang, Xiao thought the spread of the Mao cult had become excessive. "Mao posters are hung everywhere; in one restaurant, I even saw more than 70 posters hanging"; bookstores offered few options other than *Mao's Selected Works* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, which were published in a variety of shapes and colors.<sup>83</sup> Given how dangerous criticism could be in the political atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution, such testimonies from disillusioned people reflect a contemporaneous awareness of how deep-rooted the consumerist fad for Mao badges had become and how far it had strayed from its original purpose of instilling revolutionary values.

Criticism of the tremendous waste of resources that might otherwise go to industrialization and national defense was not lost on the leadership of the party. Indeed, around the time of the Ninth Congress in April 1969, the allotment of aluminum for the production of badges had culminated in metal shortages so acute that they caught the attention of Mao, who is reputed to have declared, "Give me back the planes," a quote that highlights the trade-offs between consumer goods and military priorities.<sup>84</sup> As work units were churning out badges to commemorate the Ninth Congress, members of the leadership started to call for an end to the excesses of a consumer fad that increasingly appeared to be negating the goals of the Cultural Revolution. Zhou Enlai, for instance, criticized the fad and the larger Mao cult as directly contravening the objectives of the Cultural Revolution. In a long speech at the National Planning Symposium on March 24, 1969, Zhou denounced the squandering of resources on Mao memorabilia from badges to books. Expressing serious doubts that this excessive production was actually disseminating Mao Zedong Thought, he pointed to ironies of the mania such as how the quest for more and cheaper production had led to a lack of quality control and wasteful excess. Zhou also lamented that the production of new and improved versions of the *Quotations from*

*Chairman Mao* and of badges reflected and reinforced the "three major inequalities," noting that "people in the cities have many more copies than those living outside the cities; cadres in high positions have more copies than the generals," and some families in the countryside have none (Figure 7.5).<sup>85</sup> Reporting that hoarding had become a problem, with some cadres possessing more than the hundred Mao badges and



Figure 7.5. Heartwarming inequality. A Nanjing family c. 1970 photographed their healthy infant with the latest Mao badge obtained from the father's factory. As was customary, this Mao badge was pinned above the wearer's heart (thereby allowing Mao to be held dear). The father was a work leader in a good factory who usually received more badges than ordinary workers. Although China produced billions of badges, enough to provide for every man, woman, and child, not everyone had the same access. Source: The private collection of Xi Chen.

dozens of copies of the *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, Zhou wondered aloud, "How is this not wasteful?"<sup>86</sup>

Under such pressure from the leadership, the fad seemed to end almost as quickly as it began, and the reserve army of consumers demobilized. Just as state intervention had quickened badge consumption, it also moved to end it. A nationwide crackdown on badges began on June 12, 1969, when the CCP Central Committee issued a document titled "Several Issues Worthy of Attention Concerning the Promotion of Chairman Mao Images" that stated unequivocally that "without permission from the central government, it is forbidden to make more Mao badges." The national government also banned other aspects of the Mao cult that had helped drive demand for badges. By 1970, only a few dedicated factories, such as Shaoshan Chairman Mao Badge Factory and Beijing Red Flag Badge Factory, were still producing badges, and nearly all unauthorized production by work units and the military had ceased.

Given the sheer scale of unauthorized production, however, other reasons besides the government order appear to have played a role in the collapse of the badge fad by 1970.<sup>87</sup> American journalist Edgar Snow, who spent six months in China beginning in late 1970, noted that although all officials still wore badges in early 1971, the badge fad continued to fade, particularly following the death of Lin Biao, who had been the biggest promoter of the Mao cult and the badge fad, in a plane crash in 1971, reportedly while fleeing to Moscow after a failed coup attempt. Following his death, the party leadership moved away from endorsements of the "cult of the individual" and expunged Lin and his closeness to Mao from all party propaganda.<sup>88</sup> The badge cult, which had always been connected with Lin, faded fast. According to one estimate, by 1972, the year after Lin Biao's death, only 10 percent of Chinese were wearing Mao badges. By 1974, two years before Mao's death, ordinary Chinese and leaders other than Zhou Enlai seldom wore Mao badges.<sup>89</sup>

Evidence suggests, however, that even after the end of the fad, some individuals and work units were loath to give up their badges, even if they had stopped wearing them. As late as the end of the 1970s, work units felt it necessary to ask their employees to hand in their Mao badges, roadside recycling centers collected badges as scrap metal, and the Central Propaganda Department mandated that the political departments in every work unit dispose of all "loyalty items," including destroying all "substandard, damaged, and bad quality items as well as any having Lin Biao quotations."<sup>90</sup> Yet it was impossible to dispose of the billions of pieces

of Mao memorabilia, as there were too many pieces in too many places. According to a July 19, 1978, report received by the Central Propaganda Department, for example, soldiers cleaning military warehouses discovered that many still held a vast array of "loyalty items" that had been collected from military units as well as from the civilian population. Likewise, Kunming Military Region in the southeast discovered more than 2,300 kg (5,070 pounds) of aluminum Mao badges, ten sets of steel badge molds, 720 plastic sculptures, one hundred plaster and porcelain sculptures, 250 iron sheets imprinted with Mao's image, 550 plywood boards with similar images, and 6,000 Plexiglas badges with Mao slogans.

Even four years after Mao's death and the arrest of the "Gang of Four" in 1976, the Central Committee was still finding it necessary to chastise collectors and to instruct officials to discourage the continued interest in saving and displaying "individual cultural relics," that is, Mao memorabilia. Furthermore, an increasing number of local organizations devoted to collecting and exchanging such items began to emerge across the country. The committee attempted to discourage such consumption by labeling such collections as "extravagance and waste," the opposite of the ethos of hard work and frugal living. On that pretext, it ordered that any remaining Mao badges be seized and recycled "to avoid the extreme waste of metal."<sup>91</sup>

Ultimately, however, this attempt to reassert state priorities was as ineffective as earlier policies had been in stamping out the desire for badges. Countless people ignored or resisted the order by holding on to their badges and collections, and some salvaged badges from waste and recycling stations. Although the state employed its powers to reduce the production, circulation, and consumption of Mao badges and quashed the fad, judging from the large number of Mao badges that survived, it remained difficult to convince many people to part with their prized material possessions. One group of workers disobeyed orders and saved what may have been the biggest badge ever from the heap of scrap. According to Chen Huabin, a worker at Hainan Island Machine Factory, the entire factory – some 700 workers – conspired to ignore the order and save the massive 6.5-foot-tall Mao badge that they had made in 1969. Chen himself, a foreman at the warehouse where the badge was kept, vowed to protect the badge and even contemplated moving it to his hometown to keep it safe, though he abandoned the plan out of fear it might be discovered. Nevertheless, he managed to keep the badge hidden behind the shelves in the warehouse for fifteen years, until it was discovered when the warehouse was relocated.<sup>92</sup>

### Conclusion

Viewed through the lens of the badge fad, the Cultural Revolution did not end capitalism, even momentarily, but rather served as the apotheosis of self-expanding and compulsory consumerism during the Mao era. Under state direction but without state authorization, the intense demand for badges shifted the allocation of surplus capital from state capitalist priorities, such as industrialization and military defense, to the ultimate consumerist activity – billions of articles of communist consumer kitsch fueling a consumer fad that mirrored and enhanced economic, geographical, and status hierarchies. Even at its most overt anti-capitalist turn, far from leveling social inequalities as the party promised, the Mao era witnessed not only the survival but the growth of consumer culture through people's compulsive participation in the largest consumer fad in history. Moreover, the chief agent of the “capitalist restoration” and negation of the revolution, as Mao feared, was the “revolutionary generation” itself. Young people born into New China, supposedly free from the stains of earlier imperialist, capitalist, and feudal domination, became the primary conduits of recreating and expanding capitalism, consumerism, and the accompanying social inequalities.