
**Reviewed by** James Flowers (Brain Pool Program Research Fellow, Climate-Body Institute, Kyung Hee University)

**Published on** H-Sci-Med-Tech (May, 2024)

**Commissioned by** Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

Inspired by the term “the Gilded Age,” *The Gilded Cage: Technology, Development, and State Capitalism in China* brings to light the consequences of the nexus between technology and state capitalism in China beginning in the 1980s. Ya-Wen Lei convincingly reveals a hyper-capitalist China where the state represents the cage that has entrapped the bird, the economy, while people are trapped in a cage of hyper-automation.

Lei challenges much of the scholarship and punditry that portrays China as a powerhouse economy providing inspiration to developing countries. For example, Slavoj Žižek has written of China’s success as a more efficient manager of capitalism than liberal democracies.[1] On the contrary, Lei shows how China’s worship of science and techno-developmentalism has created a form of hyper-capitalism in which the majority of the working class have been left behind. She offers a trenchant critique of the China model, outlining the many weaknesses in an economy featuring stark social inequality in terms of class relations. To make her case, the author also draws on scholars, such as Susan Greenhalgh, who show how the Chinese state uses science for social and political control.[2]

Mostly based on fieldwork research interviews from the mid-2000s to the present, the book exposes the troubling consequences of the Chinese state committing to techno-developmentalism as its guiding organizing principle. Lei highlights how its obsession with unrealistic visions of a socialist scientific techno-utopia has instead produced a hyper-capitalist techno-dystopia. Organized in chronological order, the chapters give an overview of China’s economic entanglement with science and technology in the twenty-first century. Lei brings this examination to life through theoretical analysis alongside case studies of a range of
workers and professionals subject to techno-developmentalism.

Chapter 1 sets up the theoretical framework for the book. Drawing on Daniel Bell (The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting [1999]), Lei explains China’s shift after 2008 to a post-industrial society. Her key argument in this introduction is that the Chinese state has moved beyond capitalism with an unprecedented and unique scope of instrumental power. By doing so, China’s authoritarian developmental state, with the absence of any constraints, has harnessed digital surveillance for the intensified subjection of workers and capital.

Chapter 2 traces China’s shift from a nation that nurtured a substantial agricultural base to one that instead began to focus on land-driven development with the beginnings of technological rationality guiding the economy. While local governments expropriated land from peasants, the central state identified science as the solution to facilitate economic development. Faith in science as the panacea for all of society’s ills approached religious reverence, unique in the world for its intensity. The state systematized the scientization of statecraft, implementing internal evaluation systems for the workforce that emphasized metrics and quantification of everything that could be counted.

Chapter 3 explains the implementation of metrics. Lei also analyzes the debates in the state leadership on which economic model to adopt. In the debate on whether to prioritize the interests of the working class or the middle class, the middle class won out. In the new meritocracy, the middle class received state support while the left-behind working class became the most intense object of quantitative evaluation and surveillance in the newly established factories.

Chapter 4 outlines the application of the metricization of the techno-state, specifically the points system in workplaces and the restrictive residential system that denied many workers basic rights, such as sending children to school. Moreover, many factories closed down, creating obsolete labor and capital.

Chapter 5 examines in detail the robotization of the workforce. Lei focuses on the plight of millions of low-skilled workers who were replaced by automation and left to fend for themselves. She outlines the technological fetishism of the state and its despotic practices imposed on workers still employed.

While the first five chapters nicely analyze the manufacturing economy’s relationship to techno-development, the final five chapters clearly illuminate the rise of the new tech companies and their role in digital governance. Chapter 6 traces the rise of tech companies that in the late 1990s became co-builders and partners in operating the state’s instrumental apparatus. They dominated much of China’s economy until the state suppressed them in 2020. In their heyday, they exemplified expansive integrated platforms.

Chapter 7 discusses how many workers went to work for digital platforms after leaving factories. Lei gives readers a fascinating study of the new army of food delivery workers and their plight under the regime of algorithms and metrics. This chapter does the most in answering Lei’s overarching question of why a supposed socialist country is so capitalist.

Chapter 8 studies the socioeconomic circumstances of the coding elites, highly sought-after software engineers, who are the clear winners in the techno-developmental regime. Lei shows how this group can be internally differentiated according to class background, with urban elites far out-ranking the engineers with rural backgrounds. She categorizes these prestigious engineers to show how privileged urban elites reproduce themselves.

Chapter 9 marks the climax of the book, with the dramatic crackdown, in 2020, of state capitalism on the private capitalism of the big tech companies. Lei outlines the complex reasons for big
tech’s fall, including issues of market monopolization, as well as questions of who would decide future directions in science and technology. The irony is that the triumphant state did to the tech companies what the companies had done to workers, merchants, and platform users. The state reserved for itself the right to enforce its will and to ensure control of finance.

Chapter 10 concludes in the context of economic slowdown and the state’s clampdown on any emergent public sphere. As China’s leadership has fetishized technology, the internet sector remains the most important bird in the economy. Lei ends by cautiously speculating that China will find it difficult to recover. She is certain, however, that social and economic inequality will continue in the system that prioritizes hyper-instrumental rationality.

Lei’s important book works well in showing what happens when a major nation’s raison d’être becomes science and technology rather than people’s welfare. However, the book could have been strengthened with a little historicization. For example, how is it that a state that continues to claim to be a bearer of timeless civilizational values, in the name of Confucian ethics and morality, has forgotten human values, all in the name of science? Despite this small quibble, scholars of modern China of all disciplines should read this excellent and well-written book. Also, anyone who thinks about or works on the role of science and technology in modern societies will learn much from this fine study. Its main contribution is to show how the state’s ideological embrace of science to control China and its society cannot be explained as a shift to global norms. Instead, understanding China requires grasping how science and technology have uniquely become much more than practical tools; they enact the rationalization and sociopolitical control of the entire society. China can only be understood on its own terms.

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60084

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.