

Economic Bust is Big Boom for Mao



Customers browse in Beijing's Utopia Bookshop, a hub of die-hard Maoism and opposition to liberal reforms.

Utopia Bookshop finds Chairman's teachings flying off the shelves amid financial turmoil

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BEIJING — There's no sign on the street — not even a hint of its existence.

But take an elevator to the ninth floor of a nondescript office tower here in the heart of the city's college district, and the doors open to a bustling bookstore teeming with 200 customers.

Some come to peruse, some to buy and others to listen to a popular lecture series. But everyone here shares one thing in common: they all worry that China is creeping inexorably towards capitalism.

These are diehard, left-wing communists – Maoists – and they want capitalism stopped, now more than ever.

Welcome to the Utopia Bookshop, home to the vanguard of Beijing's disgruntled left, where you can buy a copy of the *Marxist Digest*, purchase a Mao Zedong calendar – emblazoned with praise from Canada's Pierre Trudeau – and buy the latest books that tear a strip off the West and especially America.

The international financial crisis may have caused uncommon carnage around the world. But here at Utopia, it's been good for business. Bust has meant boom.

It has also bolstered the belief of Utopia's clients that Mao had it right all along: Cleave to communism – the capitalist roaders are doomed.

Manager Fan Jingtang says that almost from the moment the financial crisis struck, sales of Chairman Mao's *Selected Works* took off.

"Normally, we sell just several copies of Chairman Mao's works per month," he says. "But in the two months alone after 'the tsunami' struck, we sold more than 200."

And as the turmoil in international markets continues to reach out and touch China – choking off demand for its exports, closing factories and putting people out of work – Utopia's bookshop, website and lecture hall have all grown more popular, says Fan.

Books lambasting the West for its financial bungling have become bestsellers. Website posts attacking capitalist theory abound. Lectures that extol the virtues of prudent communism over profligate capitalism are standing-room-only events in the shop's 150-seat hall.

"China's critical voices have found a home," says Fan.

"We're against capitalist reforms."

By the entrance, a pastel-coloured reproduction of a painting showing a recumbent Mao, stretched out on a bed heaving with books, presides over business.

Nearby, shop assistant Hu Zhiyu, 23, who hails from Mao's home province of Hunan, readily admits the founder of the People's Republic came under criticism during the "reform and opening" period that followed his death in 1976. But he's back, Hu says.

"Today, the current reality" – Hu's polite way of referring to the roiling financial markets – "has made people stop and reflect. More and more people now feel that Mao was right."

Hu says customers are now snapping up books on Mao's life, Mao's thinking, and books highly critical of capitalist theory.

Mao's four-volume *Selected Works* retails for about \$30 in hard cover, while a soft cover set sells for about \$18. There are also Mao self-help books, with instructions on literature, leadership, how to be a successful provincial party secretary – even how to be sociable.

The shop was founded in 2003 by a small group of "young idealists," backed by a group of 30 left-wing intellectuals who were worried about where the country was heading under government reforms, Fan says. They feared China was on a slippery slope away from communism.

They were cautious at first – authoritarian governments have never been open to criticism here, constructive or otherwise.

But a scandal in 2004 in which the government's reform of a state-owned industry was found to be riddled with embezzlement created an opening: justified criticism rained down.

"That broke the taboo," Fan says.

Since then, in essays and lectures, the group has focused attention on the shortcomings of reform: the growing gap between rich and poor; the fact that too many people barely earn a living wage; continuous problems of corruption in the transfer of state-owned enterprises into private hands.

"The problem in the reform process is that the heads of these enterprises don't create wealth – but seize wealth," he says.

That deep-seated distrust of capitalism – especially American capitalism – is on display in the titles in the "Latest Arrivals" section – using American-authored books such as John Perkins' *Secret History of the American Empire: Economic Hit Men, Jackals and the Truth About Global Corruption. How America Deceived the Entire World.*

But the hottest book, the one garnering the most attention at Utopia, is the deeply nationalistic, *Unhappy China: The Great Time, Grand Vision and Our Challenges*, whose five authors are deeply troubled and even angered by what they perceived to have been anti-Chinese sentiments expressed by the West during China's Olympic year.

Zhang Xiaopo, who helped plan the book, told Shanghai's *Oriental Morning Post* recently, "What happened to us Chinese in 2008 made Chinese people really angry ... We finally had our Olympics and we finally made it to the centre of the world stage, but look what we got! Boycotts from the Western world."

Beijinger Chen Po, 50, was picking up two copies – one for himself and another for a friend. "I read a chapter on Utopia's website," he said. "It seems sensational."