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Paris, Le Seuil, 2004, 266 p.

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Jonathan Hall

- 1 The title of this book is a bit misleading. The real subject is the democracy movement over the last twenty-five years (1979-2004) as this period covers two hundred pages, the sixty preceding years being swiftly dispatched in a thirty-five-page prologue. This is just as well, because a more evenly balanced account of the whole period could not have thrown much more light on already such thoroughly researched events as the May 4th movement and the Hundred Flowers campaign. On the more recent period, by contrast, the author has a lot to tell us.
- 2 I propose to follow the same trajectory and pass quickly over the prologue. I would simply add that one of the most clear-sighted critics of the nationalist dictatorship, Chu Anping (quoted on p. 29), had already observed as early as 1947, "at least, with the Kuomintang in power, the struggle for freedom is still possible ; however restricted such freedom may be, it is still a matter of degree. If the communists take power, the question will become whether any freedom can exist at all". This foresight, which did not prevent Chu from siding with the communists by the end of 1948, apart from his criticism of the regime during the Hundred Flowers campaign (p. 38), clarifies under what conditions the struggle for democracy, studied in the rest of the book, had to be

conducted. I would just make one minor amendment : Wang Shiwei was not executed in 1946 (p. 31) but in 1947, when the communists were forced to leave Yanan.

- 3 The main focus of the book is on the movement for democracy during the period of the reforms, which is considered in two phases, before and after Tiananmen. The emphasis is on the first phase, since the first section, the virtuous circle of democratisation, is much longer than the second, the vicious circle of authoritarianism, which deals with recent years. It scarcely needs to be said that there is an imbalance in the contrast between the apparently positive term, the “virtuous circle”, and the phase to which it succumbs, the “vicious circle”, for the message of the work, unsurprisingly, is that whether it is vicious or virtuous, any attempt to democratise such a regime is a vain attempt to square the circle in question. So the imbalance is simply the author’s way of accounting for the facts. The first part opens with the democracy wall (1978-1979) and ends with the crisis in the spring of 1989. But there has been nothing comparable to these two events in the last fifteen years, especially since the author quite rightly excludes *Falungong* from his study of the democratic movement (p. 247).
- 4 Right at the beginning of the more substantial first section, Béja stresses two important points : 1) the lack of continuity or development between such events as the democracy wall and the Tiananmen demonstrations, just as earlier there had been none between the Hundred Flowers campaign and the democracy wall (or to go back still further, from the 1930s and the League for Democracy to the Hundred Flowers) ; 2) it is the factional struggle at the top of the Party that allows popular discontent to find an outlet. When he had taken advantage of the movement for democracy, Deng Xiaoping took care to stop it going too far, since for him and the other veterans “democracy can at best lead only to chaos, and at worst to civil war” (p. 80).
- 5 Having assimilated these broad outlines, the reader can easily follow (in Chapter 4) the finely developed examination of the discussion circles, the autonomous research centres, and the publications that also appeared autonomously in the 1980s, without harbouring too many illusions over the outcome. The more detailed account of the two years prior to Tiananmen (from the fall of Hu Yaobang to his death, in Chapter 6), occasionally gets in the way of the political history and the conflicts at the top of the Party. Similarly, there is an excursus in Chapter 8, dealing with the decision-making during the Tiananmen crisis, but in this case the interruption is entirely salutary. Thanks to the *Tiananmen Archives*, which he himself has presented to the French public¹, Béja is able to confirm that the politburo, and even its standing committee, played a minor role throughout the crisis. The major decisions were taken within the Deng circle and by Deng himself, after consulting certain members of the standing committee and, more significantly, certain of the so-called Eight Immortals. So there was no adherence to institutional procedures by the regime. In this it followed Mao’s example of non-observance of the very procedures it had drawn up itself. A whole decade of reforms and opening-up had brought no changes whatsoever to the behaviour of the leadership. Deng’s legitimacy was charismatic in nature, and Béja considers this (p. 177) to be sign of the archaic nature of the political system².
- 6 The last fifteen years since Tiananmen are dealt with more summarily, taking up three chapters as against six for 1979-1989. Chapter 9, “The consequences of the failure of 1989 for the democracy movement”, provides an excellent prognosis for subsequent developments. The first of these has been the “recoil of the intelligentsia” (pp. 206-213). A large section of the intellectuals have distanced themselves decisively from

the paths they followed in the 1980s, considering them to be a dead-end. In a sense, before Tiananmen, the intellectuals had been more optimistic, despite their discontent. But nowadays they believe that the reforms have solved nothing, and that the modernisation of China is a more complex and delicate undertaking than they had previously thought. Some of them even share the leadership's fear that a democratic experiment might threaten their beloved stability, and this has encouraged them to conclude with the Party a "bargain between elites" (Adam Michnik is quoted on p. 212 *et passim*). Béja contrasts these new majority groupings with protesters like Li Shengzhi and Li Rui on the one hand, and the dissidents on the other, rightly describing the latter as socially isolated (p. 220). There is a possibility that their influence may be even smaller than the author maintains, although his analysis in Chapter 10, bolstered further in Chapter 11, already gives scant grounds for optimism, because he shows that the popular movements (of workers and peasants) arise from the need for self-defence (p. 230) and do not threaten the regime (p. 233).

- 7 The perspectives sketched out in the conclusion, "Post-political authoritarianism or democracy ?", seem more doubtful. I am unconvinced by the "post-political" label and by the merging of Chinese conditions with the modernity pertaining in the west since the end of the cold war. As for democracy, we should hold fast to the acute observation on page 250, that "at present it cannot be maintained that the movement for democracy offers any promise of a political alternative". But what about later ? One needs to be a die-hard optimist to even consider that there is a possible choice between the perpetuation of an (extremely) authoritarian regime and democracy.
- 8 It is possible to dissent from the perspectives that the author struggles to maintain in order to keep hope alive, while still judging, as I do, that the main body of the work is lucid and substantial. Moreover it is clearly argued and a real pleasure to read. It is also a positive gain to have such a useful and comprehensive guide made available in French.

NOTES

1. Zhang Liang, *Les Archives de Tiananmen*, Paris, Editions du Félin, 2004, translated by Jean-Philippe Béja, Raphaël Jacquet, and Jade Orweil, with an introduction by Jean-Philippe Béja

2. Even if they operate somewhat crudely, such archaic elements can function very effectively, as Ian Kershaw shows in his essay on Hitler (in French, *Hitler, essai sur le charisme en politique*, Paris, Gallimard (folio) 1995). This essay is much more stimulating than the same author's large biographical work *Hitler* (Paris, Flammarion, 1998, 2 vols.).