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Paris, Fayard, 2003, 286 pp.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Translated from the French original by Nick Oates

- 1 In opposition to those who think that China is mute or muzzled, Chen Yan provides proof in his monograph *L'Eveil de la Chine* that since the last quarter of the twentieth century it has once again become a veritable laboratory of ideas that serve to foster the reforms while criticising their trends, and he does so in order to attempt to give some sense to Chinese modernity. This book is not simply an intellectual history of contemporary China, it is also a reflection on the functioning and the conditions of the transformation of the Chinese totalitarian system. "How can a reform that runs counter to the Communist ideology establish itself over the long term?" asks the author.
- 2 The work comprises two parts, which hinge around the crisis of 1989. The first retraces the different stages of the deconstruction of the Maoist and then the Communist ideology, the second reviews the extraordinary diversification of the currents of thought made possible thanks to the genuine extinction of the ideology, of its power that created both unity and uniformity. The emergence from Maoism was only possible in so far as the profound desire for reform that the trauma of the Cultural Revolution had given birth to among the population was shared within the Party apparatus, and benefited from the power struggles for Mao's succession. If this thesis is not new, it is here backed up in meticulous detail. The work highlights the tensions between a Party

desperately in need of legitimacy in order to undertake its reforms and which believes it has the ability to contain the renaissance of society within narrow boundaries, intellectuals wanting to participate in the political life but who are alienated as much as they are liberated in their collaboration with the ruling power, and the vindication movements that by turns accelerate and put a brake on the reforms. The ruling power has been outstripped by the reform that it itself launched: the intellectuals have gone far further in their reflections than it would have wished and have invested the system with the interior that allows a public space to be reborn. The debate relating to the “criteria of the truth”, initiated by the reformers within the ruling power, opens the way to the secularisation of the ideology. The debate on humanism again calls into question the communist ethic. The “New Lights” movement is re-assessing values in the light of the modernisation of the nation. And finally, the debate on the neo-authoritarianism that directly preceded the 1989 crisis is placed clearly above that of Marxist quarrels and has as its central theme the democratisation of the regime. The author plunges us into the arcana of the casuistry of a ruling power that distrusts these debates all the while finding nourishment in them for the justification of its reform enterprise.

- 3 In the second part of his work, Chen Yan shows that what is at stake, since 1989, is no longer the justification of the reforms—that is acquired from now on through their economic dimension—but the attempt to respond to the multiplicity of questions that they pose. The nationalist current presents itself as a reaction to the crisis of identity, both cultural and political, provoked by modernisation. Neo-conservatism, an attempt to reconcile Chinese tradition and Western modernity, also represents an effort on the part of the intellectuals to learn the lessons of past errors, in particular their radicalism, and to rethink their responsibility in the advent of the totalitarian regime and the crisis of 1989. The author, who one feels is more an adept of rupture than of continuity, underlines the ambiguities of a reformist process and the temptation inherent within it to justify the power in place: has the repression in 1989 not just underlined the impossibility of political reform? While the ruling power, increasingly cynical, governs in the 1990s without a clear ideological project, it is the liberal and the neo-leftist intellectuals who take it upon themselves to reinvent society's plans in reaction to the burgeoning social inequalities and corruption. These two currents coincide and disagree with each other on fundamental questions such as social justice, equality and liberty. The author concludes his comments by returning to the courageous attempts of certain liberals to spark a collective conscience and to exhume in all its truth and complexity a history over which official interpretation continues to reign. It is this crucial undertaking, still in its early stages, that will allow the backward-looking temptations of the neo-leftists to be resisted and will help the intellectuals fighting against totalitarianism to leave completely behind the dull abstraction of ideas in order to think politics *in situ*, to give a genuine sense to Chinese modernity and perhaps even to take up political action again.
- 4 As Léon Vandermeersch underlines in his preface, you would have to be, as the author is, both Chinese and French to reconcile such a precise knowledge of contemporary Chinese intellectual output and an objective detachment, which is attested to by a constant concern for analysis and demonstration. This encyclopaedic work marks an epoch; it not only fills a gap, but it presents itself as a reference work for students of Sinology as well as for specialists in intellectual history and the transition from totalitarian regimes. It brings together conclusions shared by scattered studies and at

the same time reflects more deeply on them¹. By virtue of its pedagogic nature, however, the work sometimes reveals a somewhat long-winded, even labyrinthine aspect. The concluding proposition of the concept of “conscious totalitarianism” as a way of qualifying the current Chinese regime is also rather surprising (is that to say that Maoist totalitarianism was unconscious?), even if one understands what the author is trying to say. He refers to a phenomenon that has also been described by Vaclav Havel²: bereft of its utopian and ideological substance in which the population and the leaders no longer believe, totalitarianism in its final stage becomes a mere instrument of social control that enables the Party to hold on to power.

- 5 *La Vie intellectuelle en Chine depuis la mort de Mao* is the fruit of a doctorate that the author, a refugee in France following the repression of the 1989 democracy movement, defended in Paris. This book offers a simple picture, which the non-specialists will appreciate, of the efforts to reform the Chinese system and the contribution that the intellectuals have made to them, as well as their struggles to take up the challenge of modernity. Following a slightly surprising first chapter, the intention of which seems to be to comfort the inexperienced Western reader in the idea that he might have conceived of an “inscrutable country”, and a second chapter dedicated to a historical review of the different ways in which the Chinese have attempted to respond to the introduction of Western modernity—from the Opium Wars to the establishment of Communism—, Zhang Lun tackles the real subject of his book: the departure from the Maoist system and ideology during the 1980s. The abandonment by the reformers at the heart of power of the revolutionary utopia and the theory of the class war favoured the rise of the “pragmatist” intellectuals, who played a direct part in the orientation of the reform, the technical aspects of which are promoted as much as or more than the ideological stakes. The debates on the economic reforms in particular are better developed than in the book by Chen Yan, without doubt because of the author’s direct involvement in them. This difference in stress is in keeping with the description that Zhang Lun offers of the transformation of many intellectuals into technical advisors to the current government who, often at the cost of abandoning their critical sense, have responded to the need of the ruling powers to replace the specialists decimated during the Mao regime.
- 6 If the book offers a good insight into the opening up and the diversification in the fields of human and social sciences—where the author demonstrates how they have accompanied the return of the ruling powers to “practice”, i.e., to a confrontation with the reality of the situation—, as well as of the arts and of literature, one would, however, have liked a more important place to have been granted to the debates that are raging in the field of ideas—to what is at stake here, how these ideas resonate, what their contradictions and what their limits are. The last chapter is dedicated to an overview of the 1990s, in the course of which, however, the fields of reflection become more diverse and more complex as the intellectuals question more than ever their role, their function and their relationship with the ruling power. How, for example, does “the birth of the Communist regime, then the Cultural Revolution represent the culmination of the radical and leftist wave of Chinese thought in the modern era” (p. 125)? The question would have merited a more extensive analysis.
- 7 His personal commitment pushes the author to conclude on an optimistic note that places the emphasis on two dissident parentheses in 1994-1995 and above all in 1998, which were, however, very quickly repressed, and on “a great movement for the

defence of rights” which would embrace the whole of society. If it is true that the latter takes on a greater depth at the end of the 1990s, we should not forget the profound depression into which the intelligentsia was plunged following 1989, the generalised cynicism that was to overcome society and the ruling powers, nor the emergence of new nationalist and neo-conservative ideological intellectuals who attempted to reinforce the legitimacy of the power, so badly shaken by the repression of the democracy movement. Less detailed and systematic than the work by Chen Yan, this book nevertheless constitutes a good introduction to the problems of China’s reform and modernisation.

NOTES

1. Victor Sidane, *Le Printemps de Pékin*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. Archives, 1980, on the democracy movement of the winter of 1978-1979; Jean-Philippe Béja, «Chine, Après les nouvelles cent fleurs un nouveau mouvement antidroitier?», *Esprit*, n°. 126, May 1997, on the way in which the Chinese intellectuals contributed to the abandonment of the Maoist ideology, and, by the same author, «Regards sur les ‘salons’ chinois», *Revue de sciences politiques*, February 1992, on the renaissance of a public sphere in China in the 1980s; Joël Thoraval, «La ‘fièvre culturelle’ chinoise: de la théorie à la stratégie», *Critique*, n°. 507-508, August-September 1989, on one aspect of the New Lights movement, and, by the same author, «Néo-autoritarisme et néo-conservatisme», *Perspectives chinoises*, n°. 2, April 1992; Chloé Froissart, «La renaissance du libéralisme chinois dans les années 1990», *Esprit*, n°. 280, December 2001, on the debates between liberals and neo-leftists, and, by the same author, «Xu Youyu ou comment écrire l’histoire de la Révolution culturelle pour orienter le futur de la Chine», *Perspectives chinoises*, n°. 68, May-June 2002, on the attempts to undertake a work of commemoration and to write an unofficial history of the Cultural Revolution.
2. *Essais politiques*, Paris, Seuil, 1990.