



China Perspectives

2015/1 | 2015

Utopian/Dystopian Fiction in Contemporary China

Jean-Pierre Cabestan, *Le système politique chinois. Un nouvel équilibre autoritaire* (The Chinese Political system: A new authoritarian balance),

Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2014, 708 pp.

Benoît Vermander

Translator: N. Jayaram



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/6671>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.6671

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2015

Number of pages: 67-68

ISSN: 2070-3449

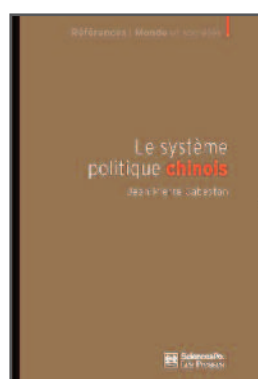
Electronic reference

Benoît Vermander, « Jean-Pierre Cabestan, *Le système politique chinois. Un nouvel équilibre autoritaire* (The Chinese Political system: A new authoritarian balance), », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2015/1 | 2015, Online since 01 January 2017, connection on 23 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/6671> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.6671>

if this commercialisation might seem to contradict the official narrative of Chinese history influenced by the CCP, it merely reflects the “ideologically ambiguous” nature of the contemporary “Chinese memorial landscape,” and at the same time reveals the fact that the state’s discourse is neither monolithic nor immutable.

■ Translated by N. Jayaram.

■ Léo Kloeckner is a contractual PhD candidate in geography at Université Paris 1. He is attached to the PRODIG laboratory (UMR 8586) and edits the online journal *Urbanités* (leo.kloeckner@gmail.com).



Jean-Pierre Cabestan,
Le système politique chinois.
Un nouvel équilibre autoritaire
(The Chinese political system:
A new authoritarian balance),
Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2014,
708 pp.

BENOÎT VERMANDER

In 1994, Jean-Pierre Cabestan published *Le système politique de la Chine populaire* (The political system of the People’s Republic of China – PUF). What he now offers 20 years later around the same theme is vastly enlarged and reworked. The difference between the titles of the first and second books is significant: apart from the strictly institutional aspect, it is the “Chinese” political system that is the issue, a system that combines and continues to integrate increasingly varying historical, cultural, and social aspects in a system in perpetual evolution and a “new and atypical” construction (p. 20). The new book explores a paradox: institutions set up just after 1949 still endure (albeit profoundly refurbished in their 1979 interpretation), even under the unprecedented economic, cultural, and social upheavals of the preceding three decades. What is presented is not a simple description of institutions but an attempt at comparative political science that grapples with the complexity, endurance, and transformation of relations between the authorities and society. The thesis may be summarised thus: it is not possible to understand the permanence of institutions amidst social upheavals they are supposed to govern without setting out the hypothesis of a “degrading continuum of the authorities, their forums, and influence on the one hand and society, structures, and social relations on the other” (pp. 20–21). By reasoning in terms of “continuum” rather than “opposition” it becomes possible to formalise the capacity for adaptation and consolidation in mainland China’s Party-state system.

The book’s introduction theorises these issues while offering a synthesis of work over the last 20 years pertaining to Chinese politics. It contrasts foreign approaches with those dominant in China itself (often concerned with “localisation” of problems), noting, however, the emergence of studies carried out by joint teams of Chinese and foreign academics. The main body of the book is divided into two parts. Part I, “Institutions,” contains 11 chap-

ters examining the way in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) understands and expresses its mission and its organisational principles, its leading organs, its apparatus, and its finances, before turning to the Constitution and state institutions, administration, judicial system, People’s Congresses, Chairmanship of the Central Military Commission, the consultative system, and finally the PLA. The result is a veritable schema of the regime and its institutions, from their starting axioms on into the details of their functions.

Part II considers the “degraded continuum” between “regime and society,” articulated around four issues: concentric circles of official political society; corruption; diversification of forms of political participation; and control of ethnic minority regions. The conclusion of Part II hesitates between two observations: on the one hand, “political authorities are still attempting to guide and channel the social corps but control it less and less” (p. 591); and on the other, “the emergence of new elites and – linked to that – new forms of political participation in a large sense, have helped the CCP retain its status while being in sync with all, or at least the majority, of the social corps” (p. 592).

A similar hesitation is to be found in the overall conclusion, perhaps overly focused on the issue of the possible duration of the regime’s survival and scenarios of democratisation. The prudence of formulations in the scenarios outlined does not, however, prevent the author from observing *in fine* that “in China, as elsewhere, freedom and democracy are not granted, they are fought for” (p. 613).

The section devoted to institutions is remarkably structured, documented, and argued. It is difficult to think of a better synthesis to offer students and foreign actors seeking to understand the politico-institutional system they are dealing with. Part II is briefer as well as more selective: it attempts to clarify the main factors that could explain how transformations of the regime and society are taking place even as institutions remain formally unchanged. The chapter on selection of elites helps understand and explain the resilience of the Party-state, the organisational and control capabilities of which remain sound. The overview on corruption is clear, but the problem’s complexity and speed of change render any approach to the phenomenon incomplete. The study of forms of political participation is strikingly detailed but would have benefited from deeper theoretical treatment, given that debate over the very notion of civil society and its implications for the country’s future remains robust among Chinese sociologists and political scientists. More generally, the book could have offered a more precise glimpse into the debate around issues of society and governance as pursued in China, a richer one and perhaps containing optimism only hinted at here. Finally, the chapter on minority nationalities raises the question of evolution (or non-evolution) of institutions with that of national security challenges as perceived by the regime.

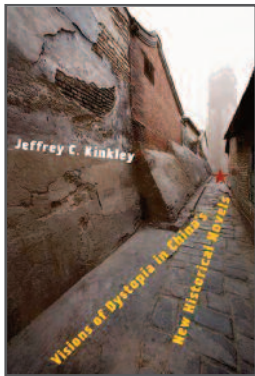
Other dimensions could have been added to the analysis, and the “continuum” issue could have gained from more precise theoretical explanation. However, at the end of Part II it is clear that by choosing the issues of elites, corruption, modes of participation, and “boundaries,” the author has rightly picked four sensitive points of articulation between the Party-state and society. On the whole, they explain both the formal resilience of institutions and the growing chasm between their spirit and what is driving Chinese society today.

The book’s length allows for easy perusal. It is a reference work that could be read at one go and also be used for checking some principle, practical aspect, political system, or other. The well-thought-out bibliography constitutes an excellent research tool. Despite the difficulty of the task, a happy

balance has been struck between the presentation of institutional and legal data and attention to day-to-day political and administrative functions. Further, the intensity of challenges facing the CCP are repeatedly stressed and explained. The book would therefore be useful for all those still concerned with the reasons behind the choices made by the Xi Jinping administration since it came to power: current developments indirectly confirm the wisdom of a number of the author's observations. Beyond or within the study of economic, cultural, and social change, renewed attention to the strictly political dimension of China's course is needed, and this book makes a remarkable contribution in setting out the nature and challenges of this course.

■ Translated by N. Jayaram.

■ Benoît Vermander is Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, Fudan University, Shanghai (benoit.vermander@jesuites.com).



**Jeffrey C. Kinkley,
Visions of Dystopia in China's
New Historical Novels,**

New York, Columbia University Press,
2014, 304 pp.

YINDE ZHANG

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of dystopian novels appearing in post-Tiananmen Square Chinese literature. In *Prosperous Age: China in the year 2013* (盛世: 中國, 2013) (2009), Chan Koon-chung (Chen Guanzhong) demystifies harmonious society and imperialist pretensions. Yan Lianke's *The Four Books* (Sishu 四書) (2010) is a fictional account of the re-education camps, written to expose a totalitarian and dehumanising world. Meanwhile *Death Fugue* (Siwang fuge 死亡賦格) (2013), by Sheng Keyi, revisits the events of 1989 in Tiananmen Square through the allegory of a "best of all possible worlds" in which young people escape one dictatorship only to fall into the clutches of another. Without turning a blind eye to science fiction, a genre that is growing rapidly in China, often fluctuating between anticipation and reality (as exemplified by Han Song in *Subway* (Ditie 地鐵) (2010), in which the author warns of imminent cataclysms concealed by flamboyant urban development), the abundance of this dystopian literature portrays a general disillusionment, while also revealing a critical space, more or less tolerated, against amnesia concerning violence in history, the triumph of liberalism, and the myth of the rebirth of the nation while ignoring the social and geopolitical tensions and ecological catastrophes that predictably result.

In his latest work, Jeffrey C. Kinkley carries out a large-scale study of this literature, but takes us back in time and examines the subject through the relationship between history and dystopia. He focuses on a collection of novels and films with historical themes, essentially produced in the 1990s by some of the most outstanding writers and directors of the period, such

as Yu Hua, Su Tong, Wang Anyi, Mo Yan, Han Shaogong, Ge Fei, Li Rui and Zhang Wei, Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Stanley Kwan. However, the main body of the work, which studies 17 "major novels," covers a longer period, since Zhang Wei's *The Ancient Ship* (Guchuan 古船) was written in 1986, and Ge Fei's *Jiangnan Trilogy* (Jiangnan sanbuqu 江南三部曲) was completed in 2011. The aim of the author is to show the ideological rupture caused by the tragedy of Tiananmen, which tipped the progressive utopia towards a vision of general dystopia. The perfect crisis, and its accompanying premonitory signs, has had lasting effects on creativity.

The term "new historical novels" (*xin lishi xiaoshuo* 新歷史小說 or *xin lishizhuyi xiaoshuo* 新歷史主義小說) that describes these works is only indirectly linked with the *new historicism* movement in Western literature. The author appears rather to be referring to Chinese criticism, which has frequently re-appropriated use of the term since the 1990s to describe altered accounts of official news stories. *Red Sorghum* (Hong gaoliang jiazu 紅高粱家族) by Mo Yan and *Wives and Concubines* (Qiqie chengqun 妻妾成群) by Su Tong, which were both made into films by Zhang Yimou, started this trend of irreverence towards established historiography, paying tribute to local cultures and traditional customs, which were in many cases reimagined and reinvented. Jeffrey C. Kinkley argues that the re-writing of history, which increased in the last decade of the twentieth century, goes beyond folkloric connotations to produce a vision that is not merely pessimistic, but powerfully dystopian, since the repeated violence and successive nature of disasters in contemporary history are clear signs of irreversible moral decline, directly challenging Mencius' theory about the innate goodness of man and therefore the future of humanity (pp. 20 and 27).

The main part of the work is divided into four chapters, which can be grouped into two large sections. In the first (Chapters 2 and 3), the author examines the intrinsic temporality of these novels, highlighting the harmful and repetitive cyclicality which, unlike traditional portrayals of time as a cyclical, alternating concept, shows the inexorable decline into which Chinese society is falling, as seen, for example, in Li Rui's *Silver City* (Jiuzhi 舊址) or Mo Yan's *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* (Shengsi pilao 生死疲勞). The second (Chapters 4 and 5) concerns a more "spatial approach," and focuses on analysing the breakdown of the social structure. The individual appears to be caught between two inevitabilities: on the one hand, repression or imprisonment, for which the family is partly responsible, and, on the other, anarchy, which sees the triumph of chaos and mankind's animal cruelty. Jeffrey C. Kinkley owes his approach to his reasoning as a historian, because he refuses to apply a psychological analysis to the trauma, considering these thematic-structural configurations to originate from observable "external" events and facts. In the same way, following in the footsteps of Hayden White and Paul Ricœur, he opts for a hermeneutical approach, identifying these texts as accounts written from memory and representations, carrying intent and seen through a prism, hence the author's scrutiny on the literary reconfiguration of history. A painstaking effort has therefore been made to dismantle the sophisticated mechanism of time and space in these writings characterised by formal elaborations that could qualify as avant-garde, shedding light on the specific way in which literary discourse presents the destructive effects of history. Comparative and contrastive analyses enrich the author's reflections when he makes heuristic comparisons between Chinese novels and the "magical realism" of Latin American literature, or the views of the time, such as educational textbooks, in which the official historiography and *doxa* are crystallised. The issue set down at the start, which purports that fiction constitutes a massive antithesis to the triumphant