



Arguments for Engaging Contemporary China

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Whether it be the 2008 Olympic games or Shanghai's 2010 Universal Expo, for several years now China, a country of more than 1.4 billion habitants, is mentioned almost every day in the news. Not a week goes by without hearing about its growth records, its clout in international trade and in raw material consumption, or about the emergence of a middle class, with a consumption level nearing that of the Western world. Far from giving the pretention of proposing a concrete representation of today's China, what is suggested in this paper are several elements that may shed light on important socio-political processes in contemporary China beyond newsbytes.

Whether it be the 2008 Olympic games or Shanghai's 2010 Universal Expo, for several years now China, a country of more than 1.4 billion habitants, is mentioned almost every day in the news. Not a week goes by without hearing about its growth records, its clout in international trade and in raw material consumption, or about the emergence of a middle class, with a consumption level nearing that of the Western world. China is becoming the world's second economic power. It has just overtaken Japan in terms of its GDP! Are these signs that the country is profiling itself not only as an emerging power, but as *the* only emerging power capable of standing up to the US?¹

Too often in comments on China, figures are all that matter and China tends to be constructed as a monolithic and static bloc. Two somehow extreme images then emerge. On the one hand, because of the authoritarian nature of its regime, a dominant picture is one of a hyper repressive political system and a population that is constantly pitted against the Communist Party. On the other hand, one often comes across the depiction of an economic giant threatening to catch up with the West, with highly impressive statistical records which generate mixed feelings of wariness and fascination among the public. It is not surprising then that many Chinese living abroad consider that the vision frequently given by foreigners of their country is far from representing the reality *they* know. But when we observe Chinese society by meeting people, reading Chinese newspapers, when we surf on its web or study scientific (academic) publications, the picture we get is far more ambivalent.

Far from giving the pretention of proposing a *concrete* representation of today's China, what is suggested hereafter are several elements that may — hopefully — shed light on important socio-political processes in contemporary China.

First of all, we can ask ourselves – being Western – about our own somewhat conscious prejudices vis-à-vis China. Culturalist explanations of China persist (China, impenetrable, would be the archetype of cultural otherness) and are sometimes mobilised to justify the exploitation of the population or its allegedly resigned subordination; but how can one justify then the more than 80,000 violent collective incidents registered every year by Chinese public security services? Besides that, we are not comfortable yet in abandoning the image of a voiceless and generally poor subaltern China, and in representing Chinese people as equals.

Secondly, we have to underline the weight of China's recent history, because that would allow us to better grasp the size of the changes operating within society. Over 30 years, China has passed from an ultra rigid society under Mao's regime, where political and ideological criteria were the exclusive master of individual destinies (the whole Chinese society was then divided into more than 60 categories rigidly determining people's lives), to a society where social and geographical mobility is particularly strong, even though it is still strongly influenced by the socialist heritage. During the first three decades of the regime (1949-1979) a radical split between urban and rural areas increased by three, or, according to some authors, six fold, the gap between citizens and peasants. A paradox of the Maoist era is in this respect to have triggered, under the cover of a rhetoric praise of rural life virtues, the creation of a gigantic reservoir of rural labour power that has proven to be a major asset in the process of the inclusion of China in world capitalism since 1979. It is this extremely flexible rural labour that has until now made possible the well known Chinese records in manufactured product exports (textile, toys, electronics, etc...) and more generally in economic growth.

Another major transformation we have witnessed since the mid 1990s is a deep reform of the social hierarchy, with the end of what was called under Mao the "iron rice bowl" (*tiefan wan*),

¹ On a more assertive China and the growing USA-China competition, See J.-P. Cabestan, *La politique internationale de la Chine*, (Paris : Presses universitaires de sciences-po, 2010).

or, rather, the end of the particularly stable State workers status, which guaranteed a job for life. A vast capitalisation and restructuring of State owned enterprises also led to the dismissal of over 100 million members of this working class that represented the backbone of the regime's legitimacy. More than a brutal *flexibilisation* of their living conditions, this represents a deep psychological trauma that affected those who not so long ago were called "masters of the country" (*guojia de zhuren*). Those former state-owned enterprise workers find themselves in the social hierarchy just above rural workers and they are now keenly asked to individually reform and adapt to the growing labour market competition.

Moreover, whereas the taking over of the communist regime coincided with the political annihilation of the category of entrepreneurs around 1956, this same category plays an essential role in the current economic development and many entrepreneurs are now members of the Party².

In parallel with these upheavals and the process of marketisation - impacting all spheres of society - the major societal principles and norms have been progressively reinvented: from the omnipotence of the Maoist discourse over class war, we have moved to a multiplication of overlapping discourses which can be interpreted in a creative manner by each individual. Individualism and consumerism prevail among young generations and a part of the middle class, whereas Maoist imagery is still strong among the over fifties which has been fuelled by the many social struggles that have fired up since the 1990s. As for the Communist Party, it has largely reshuffled its ideological tenets, combining market legitimacy, competition, individual initiative with the essence of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong's thoughts, in addition to traditional Chinese thinking, in particular Confucian thought.

Thirdly, a combination on the one hand of authoritarianism and the permanence of a series of institutions inherited from Marxism-Leninism and on the other market mechanisms, has produced some highly contrasted economic and social effects. This combination has been without a doubt effective from an economic growth and accumulation standpoint: per capita GDP has increased eight times in less than thirty years³ and millions of people have been lifted out of extreme poverty. Walking around the Yangzi Delta province (near Shanghai) or the Pearl River Delta (in the Southern Guangdong province), one can feel the impressive dynamism blended with a huge production of wealth (that can be seen through the infrastructures and the near disappearance of the rural habitat in certain coastal regions). In parallel, however, market capitalism was implanted on political imbalances and hierarchies inherited from the Maoist period⁴ and it thrived on them and thus has aggravated major disparities in terms of human and economic development and exploitation. In 2006, the per capita GDP in Guangdong province was 16 times higher than the per capita GDP of Guizhou province.⁵ The contrast between China's second position in terms of GDP and its 89th position in terms of human development perfectly illustrates the double edge of the "Chinese miracle". Today's China is amongst the countries with the largest inequalities in revenues as well as in access to health and education or housing. For instance, in the Pearl River Delta (Guangdong province), the difference between a low wage worker (migrant worker for instance) and a middle income (journalist, academics) is about 1 to 10. The three pre 1949 "big mountains" (*san zuo da shan*) feudalism, imperialism and capitalism have been replaced today for many Chinese by three new mountains: health, education and housing.

² This has been allowed by a change within the Party statutes: in 2003, the concept of the "three represents" has been adopted, the Party now representing the "advanced productive forces", the "advanced cultural forces" and the "rest of the population".

³ C. Wong, "The New Social and Economic Order in 21st Century China: Can the Government Bring a Kinder, Gentler Mode of Development?", in E. Paus, P. Prime & J. Western (Eds.) *Global Giant: Is China Changing the Rules of the Game?*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁴ J. -F. Huchet, "The Emergence of Capitalism in China: an Historical Perspective and its Impact on the Political System", *Social Research*, Vol. 73, n°1, (Spring 2006), pp. 1-28.

⁵ G. Giroir, « Les fractures socioterritoriales en Chine, ou l'impossible « société harmonieuse » ? », *Perspectives chinoises*, Vol. 3, (2007), pp. 88-98.

For more than a decade, academics, journalists, ordinary citizens, netizens and more recently also representatives of nongovernmental organisations have been drawing attention to the dramatic consequences in social and environmental terms of uncontrolled growth. The very fact that rural development, health and education have been emphasised since 2005, and then further stressed the 2009 economic stimulus plan, is significant.

Whichever quantitative or more qualitative surveys are consulted, they show without doubt that difficulties in access to education and health care have become a crucial issue in the post-Mao era for a large part of the Chinese population. Whereas during the Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin era the motto was “to become rich is glorious”, under the leadership of Hu Jintao (President of the Republic and Secretary General of the Central committee of the PCC) and Wen Jiabao (Premier), several measures aimed at reaching a better balance between economy and social needs have been taken. For instance measures aimed at “vulnerable groups” (*ruoshi qunti*) and focusing on agriculture, education, health, work (safety), environment, etc. Yet, the application of these measures meets considerable resistance and here we touch upon a key-question, namely the Party-State’s capacity to carry out policies that are likely to destabilise well established political balances and deeply entrenched interests.

China is a country where administrative and political decentralisation has been pushed very far indeed. This is at the same time key for the success of post-Mao era reforms and for a major involvement of local and regional governments in economic development. But it is also what makes the implementation of measures which threaten the local governments’ interests or shake the balances between local authorities and economic power particularly difficult.⁶

The application of measures or laws passed by the central government on security, environmental protection, labour rights, etc. has been complicated by the supremacy of local and frequently short-time interests. This is so for at least two reasons. Firstly, legitimacy of many local governments rests on their capacity to deliver growth at the local level. This growth produces concrete effects locally: proof of this growth can be seen in the infrastructures’ excellent condition in the numerous rich regions of the country. Secondly, in itself the promotion system for the Party’s civil servants pushes towards quantity, a major criteria in their evaluation being their capacity to handle economic growth and assure social stability. We need not recall here the recent news, as it illustrates the stumbling block that this strong convergence of interests between local political power and economic power represents for the central government. Be it the melamine in milk scandal, the recent pollution in the Qingdao region or protest movements in South China firms (Guangdong province) all these cases have each shown with their specificity the hurdles making attempts in social and environmental change problematic.

Policies and legal measures undertaken by the central government are likely to produce limited effects, unless the institutional equilibrium that governs the distribution of the results of economic reforms and globalisation is transformed.⁷ We can wonder to what extent the urgency of environmental and social problems will sooner or later force the Party-State to undertake stronger measures in this direction. As a matter of fact, a paradigm shift seems to be (coming) necessary.

⁶ Sun Liping, “The Biggest threat is not social turmoil but social decay”, *China Digital News*, (2009). See: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2009/03/sun-liping-%E5%AD%A9%E7%AB%8B%E5%B9%B3-the-biggest-threat-to-china-is-not-social-turmoil-but-social-decay/>; Yu Jianrong, “Maintaining a baseline of social stability”, *China Digital News*, (2009). See: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2010/03/yu-jianrong-maintaining-a-baseline-of-social-stability-part-i/>

⁷ H. Lansdowne & Wu Guoguang, *Socialist China, Capitalist China: social tensions and political transition*, (New York/Oxon: Routledge, 2009).

But to what extent will the Party take the risk of modifying the balances that allowed economic development over the last three decades? This is a crucial question, because it turned out that promises of power and expectations built within different social groups, but not regularly enough encountered, are increasingly fuelling dissatisfaction and consequently menacing social stability⁸. A wider acknowledgement of this societal dissatisfaction is therefore necessary. This problem is even more serious under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao leadership, because the Party is willing to promote “emancipating” values again. In fact, the concept of “governing by law” occupies a central place in its programme and the Party places at the very heart of its discourse around the concept of “harmonious society” notions like “putting people first” (*yi ren wei ben*).

What is the nature of the Chinese political system? If we cannot any longer talk about a totalitarian system to describe today’s China, it is appropriate to highlight once again the persistence of some institutions inherited from totalitarianism, even if their functions have changed and their effectiveness may have diminished in comparison with the Maoist period. Otherwise, the basic principles of Marxist-Leninism are still in place, as the control of social space (prohibition of creating autonomous social organisations for instance) or the control over the media, artistic and literary work. If these principles of social control remain in place, spaces for freedom, creativity and expressions are today incommensurable compared to the Mao era. Many columnists and journalists address in their articles topics that play with the limits of the official line. Some daily or weekly papers, like the “Week-end du Sud” (*Nanfang Zhoumo*), distinguish themselves by their capacity of steering the debate, of questioning this or that authority or setting “borderline” questions. Furthermore, very lively exchanges abound in the Chinese media and the internet.

In general, a certain number of evolutions pushed back the arbitrary component within society. And yet, the question of the very nature of the Chinese political system at this stage limits the extent of these accomplishments. In this respect, the question of the law and its application is emblematic. In many fields, like work rules (the new 2007 law on contracts for instance), environment, business, China has a large number of laws and, besides, the training of procurers is improving. Given the nature of the political system, however, justice remains subordinate to politics in many different ways (tribunals under the influence of the Party, judges paid by the local governments, influence of the political-legal Committee of the party in the functioning of justice, etc.). During these last 15 years, many Chinese and foreign academic works pointed towards a growing demand for social justice, citizens’ equity when facing the law, integrity of high civil servants that represents a major trend of Chinese society. Those are, in my view, irreversible tendencies and they concern many social groups: from peasants, migrants, workers to intellectuals, jurists and journalists. What remains to be seen is if the Party-State, which has already shown a certain capacity of resiliency, will be able to transform itself more fundamentally in order to maintain a strong economic growth, and to reply in a more efficient way to the mounting calls for social justice and equity within society.

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⁸ Lee 2007 and Lansdowne & Wu 2009 share such an argument. See: Lee, Ching Kwan, *Against the Law. Labor Protests in China’s Rustbelt and Sunbelt*, (Berkeley, LA: California University Press, 2007).



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