



JEAN-LUC DOMENACH

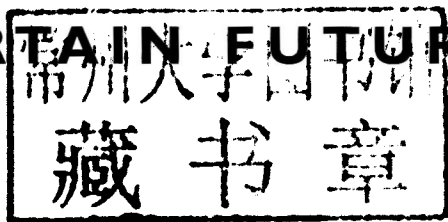
China's

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

JEAN-LUC DOMENACH

TRANSLATED BY GEORGE HOLOCH

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CHINA'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE

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THIS BOOK IS A SEQUEL TO *COMPRENDRE LA CHINE D'AUJOURD'HUI*, published by Perrin in March 2007, and, like it, was inspired by a stay in Beijing from February 2002 to February 2007. This stay would not have been possible without the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the French embassy in Beijing, whom I thank. But this book was written after my return to France and for that reason owes a good deal to the institution that again welcomed me, the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, and particularly to its Center for International Study and Research, which was warmly welcoming. I thank them as well.

Since my return, I have been welcomed by another “unit” (*danwei* in Chinese), the Perrin publishing house, where I direct the *Asies* series. I wish to express to all those involved the pleasure I experience in our collaboration and particularly to thank Anthony Rowley for his friendly lucidity and Marie-Laure Defretin for her warm professionalism.

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Introduction

The New “Chinese Moment”

CHINA IS NOW JUST AROUND THE CORNER. ONE-FOURTH OF THE bars-tabacs in Paris are Chinese owned, and you cannot take the Métro without seeing students or businessmen from Beijing. In September 2007, a Chinese warship for the first time dropped anchor in a French port on the Mediterranean, a stone's throw from fashionable beaches.¹

This is a worldwide phenomenon. The paths of Chinese emigration traverse Russia and central Europe. The leader of the parliamentary opposition in Australia has touted his knowledge of Mandarin as part of his 2007 election campaign strategy.² Chinese companies are doing business throughout Africa, much to the chagrin of Westerners, who thought they owned the territory.

This sudden spread of the Chinese presence is the effect of an economic triumph that has made history: an average annual growth rate of 9 percent for three decades, driven by foreign trade—the third largest

in the world—and particularly by exports. As a result, although socially poor, China is rich in its currency reserves. Except for top-of-the-line technology and cultural products, nothing escapes from its commercial empire: it controls 70 percent of the world market of Paris mushrooms, and the statuettes of saints bought in Brazil are made in China.³

China is not only more visible; it is more important. Western leaders no longer travel to Beijing to make sure the dragon is still sleeping or to question it about its region. They come to speak to it about world affairs, to ask that it reduce its exports, and to secure contracts to support their own economies. It is not an accident that President Sarkozy's diplomatic adviser, Jean-David Levitte, was a trained specialist in Chinese and Asian affairs.

All these developments point to the rapid rise of China toward the top of the world hierarchy. And the least that one can say is that this event has not provoked ordinary reactions. Whereas the rise of Japan forty years ago was generally ignored, the progress of China has produced discordant responses around the world. That progress is sometimes admired and often exaggerated. Jacques Chirac, for instance, declared off the bat in a speech at Beijing University on October 26, 2006, that he considered China a serious candidate for the leadership of world affairs. Sometimes—particularly among journalists and human rights advocates—people exaggerate or extrapolate. And they denounce the machinery set up by the Chinese leadership to deceive the world and exploit their own people—for “China provides the spectacle of a marriage of neoliberalism with communism.”⁴

All in all, there are very few who, like Lucien Bianco, have kept a cool head and think that “the accession to the status of world power of a nation-continent containing one-fifth of humanity merely corrects an anomaly.”⁵ The European public views China primarily as a threat: people wonder what would be left of the West if the Chinese succeeded in investing as much intelligence in their economy as they have in labor. And what will happen to world oil reserves when per capita Chinese energy consumption reaches the level of the most developed countries?⁶ Reactions vary depending on the degree of confidence people have in their own country. Only the English have a majority of optimists (60 percent). The anxious

amount to 57 percent of Germans, 60 percent of Italians, and 64 percent of the French.⁷ So what does the future hold? Susan Shirk, a former White House adviser on the Far East, is worried: with respect to present-day China, she speaks of “the rule that rising powers cause war.”⁸

It is as though, after the idealization of the Cultural Revolution and the denunciation of the June 1989 massacre, a new “China moment” was taking shape in public opinion, one characterized by a kind of stupefaction in which admiration is mixed with fear, as though we were nothing but prey at the mercy of the dragon of the Far East, as though the long history that led the West to dominate the world had been reduced to nothing, as though its inner strength had disappeared in a few decades.

I have striven to remain impervious to fashionable currents, such as the French “Maoists” of the past and, more recently, the ill-informed observers who refuse to take into account the changes brought about by economic growth. I have formed, or rather reformed, my judgment over the course of my years spent in Beijing, from February 2002 to February 2007. To my great surprise, I have come to realize that many Chinese have a much more realistic assessment than one might imagine—sometimes a frankly pessimistic one—of the huge gap that still separates them from the West. Many think that present-day China is large without being great and that it is not a modern country but a vast and unevenly developed work in progress. The impression of power it gives off derives from its huge population and the immense space it occupies, but its modern sector is confined to a few metropolises.⁹

I asked myself what motivated the pessimism of my interlocutors, and I investigated. Relying on books recently published in China, I considered its history of violence and failure, which the Chinese economic triumph of the last three decades has not succeeded in making people forget about. In addition, my immersion in China led me to see that the existing polemical positions on the country are contradicted by the facts. For example, it is thought that because it has not developed democracy, China has not been struck by economic incompetence and political paralysis. In fact, although it has developed a victorious economic strategy, it has not overcome the many serious dangers that still affect its growth. Finally, if the communist regime were as effectively authoritarian

as both its advocates and its enemies believe, its leaders would have already forced the application of the rather reasonable economic policy that they have recently adopted.

I came to understand that the Chinese man in the street is deeply right to evaluate dispassionately the outcome of the thirty “glorious” years of Deng Xiaoping’s policies: after all, after so much suffering, this was the least that the communist government had to do to hope to secure the forgiveness of History. And I internalized his caution, because the problem is not the present but the future. When the cymbals of triumph finally fall silent, China will be confronted with a moment of truth. Only then will we know whether it can become a great modern country.

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Book I

Measure for Measure

WHAT IS THE STATE OF CHINA? OBSERVERS GENERALLY SEEM TO agree that in the last three decades China has made enormous economic progress, significant gains in foreign policy, and relative advances in social and cultural matters, but little political progress—and even less when it comes to human rights. But they have divergent views of the importance of these various sectors. Some analysts believe that economic progress will bring about improvements in everything else; others, that the lack of democracy will in the end produce catastrophe. It is not surprising that the former are generally close to business circles and are well connected in Beijing. The latter are often intellectuals who believe that the defeat of the dissident movement has done nothing to invalidate the maxim of its founder, Wei Jinsheng: “Without the introduction of a democratic system, China will be unable to develop in a stable and durable way.”¹

The position I set forth here strives to take into account the arguments of both sides but contends that they often exaggerate: either they do not relate statistics to the size of the Chinese territory and the country's population and do not pay sufficient attention to the huge cost of the economic progress that has been realized, or they do not grant sufficient importance to the huge effects of economic progress and pay no attention to the problems that rapid democratization would have posed and would still pose. This position is based on a judgment made by Lucien Bianco: "The development of China over the last quarter century is as different from the Maoist period as the Empire was from the French Revolution."² Hence, it is as pointless to exaggerate as it is to deny the elements of continuity.

Chapter I

The Regime's New Foundations

The End of Totalitarianism

CONTRARY TO WELL-ESTABLISHED STEREOTYPES, THE CHINESE political regime was both renewed and consolidated. The essential event was the end not of communism but of totalitarian communism: the country is still governed dictatorially by the Chinese Communist Party, but this dictatorship has assumed less power over people and events than the former Maoist regime.

The way in which Deng saved a regime that Maoist frenzy had plunged into misfortune, disorder, and impotence is now well known. Upon returning to power in December 1978, he promised to concentrate his efforts on concrete growth, and he took preliminary measures to boost incomes. To consolidate the trust that his prestige had earned him, he immediately abolished the least bearable aspects of Maoist

totalitarianism and released a number of political prisoners. Then in the 1980s, while reaffirming the political monopoly of the CCP, he institutionalized the regime, decentralized the economy, dismantled the people's communes, and authorized the emergence of a nonstate sector.¹ This gradual transition appeared to be threatened by the tragic events of Tiananmen Square in 1989. But instead of allowing himself to be trapped politically by the bloody repression he had ordered, Deng was able to take advantage of it to accelerate economic reform and the opening of the nation to the world without causing anyone in the CCP to fear that "class enemies" would benefit.

Deng granted priority to economic development, with the goal of saving the communist regime and ensuring its long-term survival. But if the population were to go back to work, it could no longer be stifled. The shift from totalitarianism to what the American scholar Minxin Pei calls "developmental autocracy" meant a transition from mass terror to increasingly selective repression and more flexible control.² The results after three decades are considerable.

Today, prisons and labor camps hold only a small number of political prisoners—probably a few thousand or a few tens of thousands, if one includes prisoners from various sects, such as the Falun Gong: too many, of course, but China is no longer one of the world leaders in repression. The Chinese gulag has not been dismantled, and the carceral situation varies, depending on location, from very bad, through bad, to almost correct, but arbitrariness is in retreat, and the range of application of official legislation is growing. Generally, we have witnessed an explosion in the use of law: the number of trials almost tripled between 1987 and 2003, and the number of judges increased from seventy thousand to 180,000 between 1988 and 2004.³ Courts and prosecutors have been seeking to assert themselves against the security forces, and not all trials are fixed in advance, particularly because lawyers have been promised a law guaranteeing legal immunity for their statements in court. Trials have become more effective in dealing with labor disputes.⁴ Similarly, citizens' complaints against the state—hence against local administrations—will soon be treated more impartially, because they will be judged by tribunals at a distance from local courts.⁵ The death penalty, which is unfor-

tunately very popular in public opinion, is practiced on a scale unknown in any other country in the world, although the rate has declined since the requirement that each decision must be confirmed by the Supreme Court was enacted. One positive sign is the fact that the Chinese authorities noted as a success the decline in the number of executions in 2006. According to Amnesty International, the number was still between 7,500 and 8,500—enormous, but the tendency is clearly downward.⁶ Though theoretically prohibited, torture has not disappeared, but it is more and more frequently punished, as is the abominable traffic in the organs of executed prisoners, which is one of the disgraces of contemporary China.⁷

The fundamental change is that the Chinese Communist Party has abandoned any ambition to bring about a global transformation. Mass campaigns have become less frequent and weaker, control over the population has relaxed, and the surveillance of private life in urban settings has been abolished. For example, on October 1, 2003, to the almost total indifference of the foreign press, an essential element of totalitarianism was eliminated in Beijing (after it had been in most other cities): the requirement that anyone getting married present a certificate of good conduct drawn up by their party unit, which had guaranteed the power of party committees over private life; in reality, changes in housing and economic organization had increasingly reduced its application. Soon thereafter, all city dwellers received the right to a passport with no prior certificate from the police or their employer.⁸ These two measures symbolized the definitive end of the totalitarian system.

But this positive development has not prevented a massive increase in the violation of social rights, stemming from the new importance of the economy and hence of money to the communist leadership.

The difficult situation of Chinese women is largely attributable to the fact that they are subject to commerce of every variety. This situation is little known outside the country because it is not very visible and often denied in China, even by the women themselves involved.⁹ China is one of the few countries in which more women than men commit suicide. The proportion of women in responsible positions of any kind is the smallest, and female workers are subject to the most brutal domination.¹⁰

This situation is preserved by habits developed before communism, by the “innovations” of the Maoist period (which liberated women only as workers), and by the recent commercialization of the female sex. But it is certain that the public authorities, especially in villages, bear very heavy responsibility in these matters.

Moreover, it is as workers that Chinese citizens are most ill treated today. Despite the press campaign organized by the authorities in the summer of 2007 and the publication of penalties imposed on companies, very few of them respected the official legislation. Four companies out of five did not sign employment contracts with their workers before a law applicable in January 2008 was adopted, and companies are already working to sidestep it; at least they are now denounced by the press and sometimes sanctioned by courts.¹¹ Failure to respect the law helps explain the incredible number of workplace accidents—there were 127,000 deaths in 2005—¹² and the level of worker discontent prevalent in several industrial sectors, particularly in mining: in many places, particularly in Shanxi, local officials make private investments in illegal coal mines where accidents are frequent and deadly. But workers rarely dare to organize because they are overseen by thugs hired by the bosses. Indeed, companies themselves often assume police powers: an American correspondent reported that he had been detained by factory thugs and that the police on the scene dared not intervene.¹³ Migrant workers are subject to authoritarian treatment, even to forms of slavery, as several scandals in 2007 demonstrated. In all these cases, companies benefit from the complicity of local authorities.

A Chinese Recipe: Relaxed Authoritarianism

There still remain some traits from the Maoist period. For example, the rulers reside in the same imperial park that Mao Zedong and his companions occupied in 1949, a stone's throw from the Forbidden City. Very few visitors are admitted, and the highest-ranking authorities almost never grant interviews. Yet the regime has reduced its political objectives—it promises that China will remain for more than fifty years