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China and its Past: Return, Reinvention, Forgetting

Térence Billeter, *L'Empereur jaune*, Paris, Les Indes savantes, 2007, 549 pp.

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- 1 In this book on Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor, the mythical patron figure of Chinese civilization, Térence Billeter presents a meticulously documented study on the Chinese authorities' use of traditional culture today. His main thesis is that the Beijing regime is in this way seeking to "build an alternative model of modernity to counter the dominant Western one" (p. 432). This nationalist ideology seeks above all to impart a renewed legitimacy to the authorities in rallying their new social base, "the emerging urban and cosmopolitan bourgeoisie." In the process, they perpetuate a vision of politics harking back to the imperial state's creation. The work consists of nine chapters and copious annexes. The first chapter plunges into the heart of the matter with a lively description of a 1999 ceremony in Huangling, a township in Shaanxi province, where the shrine of the Yellow Emperor is located. The second chapter leaps back to another epoch, 1688, and to similar ceremonies through which Billeter introduces the practice of venerating Huangdi and, more generally, imperial cults. The third chapter, on the "nationalist transfiguration" (p. 20) of Huangdi, tries to make a link between these two dates by focusing on a certain number of cults taking place towards the end of the imperial era (for instance by the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance, Tongmenghui), under the Republic, during the Anti-Japanese war (Kuomintang and Communist delegates paid a joint homage to Huangdi in 1937 and 1938), and during the early years of the People's Republic. Though suspended during the Cultural Revolution, the practice revived in the reform era. The author shows how the rituals have changed with the passage of time and have always been adapted to the needs of the moment.
- 2 Then comes a broader reflection on Chinese nationalism, its history dealt with at the outset of the fourth chapter to provide a better understanding of the different connotations of the Huangdi figure at given times, especially as creator of the centralised state and/or ancestor of the race. The next chapter pursues this enquiry in

Communist China. The retreat of nationalism in the face of socialism, the symbolically inappropriate nature of the allusion to the Han race or nation (in the context of internationalism or absorption of minority nationalities), and the personality cult of the Great Helmsman are among the factors that explain the gradual eclipse of the Huangdi figure. Billeter notes the return in the 1980s of a mix of tradition and socialism¹, whereas the 1990s were, in his view, characterized by nationalism as the dominant trait in Chinese political discourse. In this context, he explains that the Huangdi figure underwent a real consecration by the authorities (p.191), who, depending on what they wanted to achieve, played on different themes: founding hero (of the political), civilizer (since the Chinese state, the author holds, sees itself as the incarnation and agent of civilization) and progenitor (ancestor of the Hanand, by extension, the Chinese nation) (p.240-42).

- 3 In the next section the author goes beyond the specific case of the Yellow Emperor to reflect on the role of culture in the creation of political legitimacy in China today. He first studies a list of 100 patriotic sites presented in official propaganda (chapter 6) before taking a more theoretical approach to the debate (chapter 7). Proceeding from reflections on the difference between nationalism and patriotism and on theories of nation, he shows how, gradually and in a decisive manner, the relative weight given to socialism and a reinvented and partially remobilized high traditional culture (depending on its utility) become reversed in Communist Party discourse (p. 313). He perceives a return of zhengtong, a way of legitimating politics through reference to the past (p.343) directed by regime propaganda “smoothly” using mass culture (p.348 sq). After having set the general political scene, the remainder of the book refocuses on Huangdi. The eighth chapter looks at two connected aspects: tourism — which the authorities are developing — and popular religion. Billeter briefly evokes the relation that has built up around this last issue between the peasantry and political authorities looking to promote a neutralized veneration shorn of “superstition.” The last chapter is a more general reflection on the foundation of the political, the author showing that the Beijing regime deliberately displays some aspects of a symbolic system that has played a role in the imperial state’s ideological construction (p. 397), thus perpetuating “a vision of politics whose origins go back to the establishment of the imperial state two millennia ago.” In developing these theses, the book considers an impressive number and diversity of materials while situating itself in an interdisciplinary approach that ranges from political science to fairly broad sociological considerations, to anthropological observation of precise events in historical perspective. Such an approach is theoretically rich, and the essay is lively and readable despite its length. Basically, Billeter puts forth sound arguments to back his analyses of the centrality of cultural nationalism that Chinese authorities use today as an alternative to modernity. One need not entirely agree with his analysis to appreciate the merit of Billeter’s coherent thesis on the regime’s ideological evolution, which constitutes a major contribution to the debate. Having made these points, however, some limitations of the study need to be noted. Firstly — as acknowledged in his own introduction — Billeter systematically adopts a “top-down” approach that ultimately perceives reality through the prism of the authorities and elites², in whom is vested the initiative in cultural matters, faced with a society that seems little more than a material on which their mark can be left. This is paradoxical, given that the author devotes remarkable attention to China’s social evolution in the 1990s, which, it may be noted, greatly contributes to the book’s interest. The question of the interaction between the

authorities and a people whose “horizon of expectations” extends along with the expansion of its “field of experience” is only infrequently considered. If there is one phenomenon that characterizes the historicity of the start of the new century in China, it is precisely that society is also reappropriating some fragments of its past heritage³. In this respect, it would no doubt have been interesting to further distinguish, in the reappearance of a discourse dealing with culture, that which stems from a policy conceived at the top and imposed on those at the bottom (in a manner that is still quasi totalitarian) and that which corresponds to the response the authorities come up with to deal with (if not weaken) the aspirations of a society that is now enjoying much greater autonomy⁴.

- 4 With this, the discussion emerges from the strict confines of the Yellow Emperor to consider “high traditional culture” more generally, though the concept remains extremely vague. Another limitation of the work may be underlined at this point, where Billeter uses the Huangdi figure to present a much larger and more general thesis on the development of a cultural nationalism in China. In what way doesn't it go too far? While it is often noted that the authorities cannot lose sight of socialist heritage in their use of culture, the book nevertheless gives the impression that the game is set for the present, and that cultural nationalism is shaping up as the indubitable new source of legitimacy for the authorities. Is that really so? What of the strength of socialist tradition in China? What other hypotheses may be envisaged? These questions are not really discussed. While they need not necessarily form part of a work limited to Huangdi, they are nevertheless central to a larger analysis of the regime's ideological evolution. Finally, another question may be posed: Doesn't Huangdi lend himself particularly well to this type of interpretation precisely because he is, as Billeter shows only too well, a nationalist icon? In other words, using Huangdi, would it be possible to come to definitive conclusions on the appropriation of “high traditional culture” by the authorities? As he considers the difficulty of proceeding in this manner, the author chooses to expand the debate using interesting developments: analyses of lists of patriotic sites drawn up by the regime (which also helps gauge the weight given to socialist heritage) or frequent evocation of other figures such as Confucius.
- 5 The Huangdi/Confucius parallel is especially interesting. Billeter shows quite well that historically, the recourse to one or other of these two figures is not a neutral activity. Furthermore, one has sometimes been invoked to counter the other. Thus Zhang Binglin (1869-1936) was able to invoke the figure of Huangdi, ancestor of the Han nation, to instil a national feeling detached from Confucianism and rejecting the “imperial tradition” (p. 135). In the very heart of the Kuomintang era, during the “New Life Movement” (xin shenghuo yundong) launched in 1934, which claimed in many respects to have Confucian values, a proto-fascist faction was disdainful of cosmopolitan and Confucian universalism, preferring instead the racial exclusivity of Huangdi (p. 159). Even today, we might add, Confucius and the Yellow Emperor stand for entirely different things. The ancestor figure (or, in the author's words, that of the founding hero, civiliser and progenitor) is not that of a Master or Sage. And if one talks of zhengtong (see above), it is not possible to forget that Confucianism is also historically linked to Daotong, i.e. to the transmission of the Way, imbuing it with clearly subversive potential⁵. Billeter repeatedly stresses the current recourse to Confucianism: he mentions its “spectacular return to grace” in the 1990s (p.190), the philosophical bases established by the new Confucians since the late 1950s (p.266), the

resumption of Confucius anniversary ceremonies at Qufu, and even the promotion of the moralising role of Confucius (pp. 347, 430), “whose teaching is recalled to help restructure Chinese society”⁶. While the increasing reference to Confucianism and other aspects of “high Chinese culture” is undeniable, these elements should nevertheless be considered with caution. The return to grace in the 1990s is notable in the context of the situation that prevailed in the 1980s, but it is highly marginal in terms of the totality of ideological output by the regime during this period and remains largely circumscribed in the academic world. On the other hand, the philosophical bases of the system promoted by the authorities are certainly not those of the new Confucians referred to in the book, who are mostly ardent advocates of Western-style democracy and promoters of a universalist humanism (much more than of any narrow nationalism). It is also through direct references to democracy, deemed a universal dharma, that a Confucian such as Mou Zongsan, who is an inheritor of the May 4th Movement, reinterprets what should be the new *zhengtong*. It may also be noted that the authorities generally observe the utmost prudence on another front, that of some forms of intellectual and “illiberal” Confucianism that are now growing in the continent. As for official celebrations in Qufu, a more detailed analysis might conclude that the government would organise them very differently if it were really concerned with restoring the old Sage to a prominence. For all these reasons, it appears that the Confucius figure is actually more difficult to mobilise than the Yellow Emperor. If the authorities do re-appropriate it partially and episodically, it is always with caution and no doubt to associate their action in the cultural domain with Chinese society’s ongoing massive rediscovery of its past⁷. None of these remarks in any way detract from the very high quality of work presented in *L'Empereur jaune*. Erudite and absorbing, the book will certainly become a durable reference for those interested in the relationship between power and culture in contemporary China.

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7 Sébastien Billioud

8 China Perspectives n°72, 2007/4, page n°0

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15 Translated by N Jayaram

NOTES

1. Under the slogan "building a socialist spiritual civilization" (p.185)
2. Authorities and elites are clubbed together here because the author often bases his argumentation on writings that are not, strictly speaking, official discourses but rather conference papers or articles and works by professors. It should be stressed in passing

that problems can arise when interpreting this type of documents in the same way as materials of a more official nature (speeches or five-year plans, among others)

3. See, for example, the article by Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval in this issue of *China Perspectives*.

4. Billeter certainly insists on a link between the authorities and their social base. While referring to the Communist Party, he says that “its basic objective is to formulate an ideology for its new social base – the emerging urban and cosmopolitan bourgeoisie – in order to ensure its cohesion and gain its loyalty at a time of capitalist globalisation” (p. 432). However, the arrangement here remains one in which the initiative is always with the authorities. This is all the more evident when he says, “the Chinese Communist Party has succeeded in modifying the rapport between the population, especially in urban areas, and high traditional culture” (p. 349). However, there is little discussion of the relationship that this “social base” (by no means homogenous) may on its own maintain with classical culture.

5. A classic response to this is to stress that Confucianism’s subversive power is far from having been dramatically manifested in history. While refraining here from joining in that debate, it may be simply stressed that in China today, some aspects of current Confucianism (rediscovered, reinvented, or re-imported) could present, for the authorities, a subversive potential.

6. All these elements back his thesis on current nationalism, which, as he has very well explained, is not founded on Confucianism alone (p. 305): “The regime’s ideologues have clearly preferred to embed the new Confucianism in a much larger sense of national spirit, thus avoiding turning a philosophical orthodoxy into the sole criterion of Chineseness

7. On these issues, see Sébastien Billioud, “Confucianism, ‘Cultural Tradition,’ and Official Discourse in China at the Start of the New Century,” in *China Perspectives*, no. 2007/3, pp. 50-65.