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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Philip Liddell

- 1 Giving French readers access to what the finest Chinese thinkers are writing about their own country : that is the aim of *Ecrits édifiants et curieux sur la Chine du XXI^e siècle* (Informative and interesting essays on twenty-first century China. A journey through contemporary Chinese thinking), compiled by Marie Holzman and Chen Yan. The book groups together a dozen contributions from writers who are all Chinese—except for one, the American Perry Link, considered as “the most Chinese of the sinologists”.
- 2 The first part, “Progress reports on the political reforms”, is still optimistic in tone. In Li Shenzhi's view, even though China has been under autocratic rule for 2,200 years ; even though Western scientific thinkers from the Greeks onwards have been seeking what is true, whereas Chinese scientific thinkers from the time of Confucius have been seeking what is good ; democracy and Confucianism are compatible. The heavy price that the Chinese people have paid since 1840 for democratisation has not been in vain, because “the democracy objective” is steadily coming closer. Wu Guoguang is less hopeful : his view is that the political reforms were bloodily sacrificed in Tian'anmen Square in June 1989, even before they came into being. Since then, the power of money has, in the short-term, taken control of history. As for the economic reforms, these have already come to an end.

- 3 The third contribution is an appeal by Liu Xiaobo in favour of human rights. The writer stresses that much progress has been made in this field since 1989, thanks particularly to the Internet ; and he lists many precise examples. He also notes that people are having increasing recourse to the law in defence of their rights. But there is still some important work in progress : the most immediate priority would be to end the discrimination suffered by peasants who, though the larger part of the population, are still second-class citizens. The fourth contribution, by Yan Jiaqi, argues for constitutional reform to end the position of “emperor for life” and to establish what he calls a “parliamentary presidential system” and a federal or confederal system. That should provide a resolution to the problem of Taiwan, and also to the problems of Tibet and Xinjiang.
- 4 The second part of the book, entitled “What is the condition of Chinese society ?” conveys a sense of disenchantment, to say the least. The economist Chen Xiaonong offers an explanation for the mystery of China’s growth, which, despite its annual rate of around 8%, is accompanied by deflation and rising unemployment ; in fact, the number of university graduates now outstrips the number jobs. According to Chen, “the characteristics of the Chinese economy [. . .] deprive people at most levels of any possibility of ascending the social scale ; because of that, the narrow circle of the elite will become ever more closed and exclusive”. The sociologist Sun Liping analyses the extreme polarisation of society and the emergence of an overall elite that hoards for its own benefit all the political, economic and cultural capital. He fears that present-day developments will lead, not so much to the formation of a middle class, as to a polarised society on the Latin-American model.
- 5 Li Changping goes back over the mess created by the non-implementation of political reforms in the countryside, the principal cause of the recession that overwhelmed it in the 1990s. He argues that the emancipation of peasants, rural organisations and basic collectives is long overdue. The last four contributions to the book describe the deterioration in the condition of women, the difficult development of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and of civil society, the climate of insidious terror created by censorship, and the Falungong phenomenon. Lastly, and by way of conclusion, Chen Yan goes back over political developments since 1949, as China lurched wildly between utopia and repression.
- 6 The main priority of Communist Party leaders is to keep themselves in power, Perry Link explains. Li Shenzhi concludes, “the clique of CCP members, who once were motivated by noble ideals, has degenerated into a class solely concerned with its own power and profit”. So Chen Yan’s judgement is hardly surprising : the Party is now incapable of inspiring hope.
- 7 As Link emphasises, the CCP has always favoured a psychological form of control, based mainly on self-censorship. Since the policy of reform was introduced, this discipline has extended beyond China’s own resident population to foreign researchers and businessmen. This reality renders these *Ecrits édifiants et curieux* all the more precious. Everyone interested in China should make a point of reading them.
- 8 At the end of this exciting journey across the landscape of Chinese thinking, one cannot help wondering how representative are the selected contributors, and how widespread their ideas may be in China itself. Chen Yan and Marie Holzman declare that they chose their contributors as personalities they valued for their intellectual honesty, for their perceptiveness and their personal involvement in China’s development. The hope is

that the impact of their writing and their activities may be, if not decisive, then of growing significance.