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In the Name of the State: Interactions between local administrators and citizens

Séverine Arsène, *Internet et politique en Chine*

(Internet and Politics in China), Paris, Karthala, 2011, 420 pp.

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China has already had for many years the largest population of Internet users (564 million at the end of 2012), way ahead of the United States (245 million) and even farther ahead of India (137 million). Furthermore, the Chinese communist regime represents a polysemous counterpoint to the idea that any modernisation process would inevitably be conducive to a democratic political transformation: the period under the “reform and open door” policy that started in 1978 has gone on longer than the period of repeated tragedies of revolution without leading to any formal proposition on political reform. The Internet in China is thus challenging the effects associated with the unrealistic “technologies of liberation.”⁽¹⁾ If the new electronic means of communication speed up and deeply transform social relations and the individualisation processes, they do not necessarily guarantee the triumph of liberty over the dark forces of an authoritarian Party-state. Does this mean that politics do not exist on the digital highways of information in China? Does the apparent omnipotence of fierce censorship forbid any public display of interest in public affairs? If there is any political expression, can it be freed from its official function as a highly valued tool for technocratic governance? This book by Séverine Arsène addresses all these issues and admirably succeeds in reconstructing the complex expectations of what she calls the “ordinary Internet users.”

If the aim is to “analyse the formation of Chinese public opinion online as a product of a dominant ideology in urban China,” it is in order to demonstrate that beyond censorship and the self-censorship, “the legitimate methods for speaking out individually and collectively on the Internet” (p. 47) allow original forms of mobilisation that gain a certain autonomy simply because today the regime builds its legitimacy partially on the existence of this public opinion. Beyond the famous causes of virtual mobilisations, from the Sun Zhigang case to the provocative outrage of Ai Weiwei over the disproportionate number of school collapses during the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, or from the pugnacity of the cyber-journalist Zuola to the “discordant” blog of Fu Jianfeng at *Nanfang zhoumo* (南方周末) when the scandal over the melamine-tainted milk began to emerge, Séverine Arsène focuses on the multiplicity of the “small daily actions that the Internet users do online almost incidentally,” which represent “such a smooth form of participation that it is almost unconscious” but nevertheless “powerful” (p. 411).

After a very (too) long introduction setting out the political context (an authoritarian state governed by a monopolistic party) and the social one (modernisation through the development of middle classes if not “invented” then at least “patronised”), highlighting the balance of power between the state and society, going beyond the dichotomy liberation/repression and

taking the usual precautionary academic steps in explaining her sampling of 50 semi-directed interviews with “ordinary Internet users” (young, educated, and urban... in this case exclusively Beijing dwellers), Séverine Arsène unravels her main findings in three broad sections, closely combining long excerpts of the stories gathered with more high-profile cases. The first section focuses on the issue of modernity and on the form that the affirmation of individualism takes in China, and ends with the sad statement that the standards imposed by the dominant ideology necessarily lead to a distrust of political affairs, which Séverine Arsène skilfully refers to as the “evaporation of politics.” Nevertheless, the second section emphasises the “responsibilising” nature of speaking out online, in whatever form it takes, and the necessity to observe the forms of expression in “*chiaroscuro*,” which would avoid the constraints that prevent public speech. Finally, the last section highlights the diversity of positions (outrage, involvement, mobilisation, etc.) by insisting on the ambiguities of “the Chinese governance of public opinion,” master and slave at the same time. The book ends with a conclusion (unfortunately underdeveloped) on the paradoxical power of online public opinion, which will ultimately prevail at least because of its utilitarian nature.

Needless to say, Séverine Arsène’s book is an important and even essential work. It is important because it fills a gap in the landscape of French publications: while publications in English on this subject have mushroomed since 2003, when Shanthi Kalathil’s *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* was published, only some rare, brief journalistic volumes existed in French, multiplying anecdotes that inevitably led to the emancipation of a thousand Davids from an ultimately out-dated Goliath. It is also important because it offers a sophisticated and shimmering interpretation of the complexity of public expression in China, moreover in a virtual context where the line between public and private spheres is significantly blurred at the same time as the private sphere has enlarged substantially. Beyond this praise, two drawbacks have to be singled out. First of all, on the form, the sequences of the work could have been extensively reworked: 70 pages for the introduction, but only four pages for the conclusion! And several repetitions could have been easily avoided (thus on the “50 Cent Party” [*wumao dang* 五毛党], the specifically Chinese form of astroturfing⁽²⁾ – an unfortunately absent term – an identical mention appears on p. 34 and p. 42). The three large sections themselves could have been adjusted to offer a panorama more accessible to a non-expert reader: for example, the individual, the client, and the citizen. Here I do not blame the author but rather the editor, who could have contributed to making the text clearer and stronger. Regarding the content, our objection lies in a fascination with the information issuer/recipient that necessarily leads the author to give an over-determined tacit power to Internet users: from an analytical perspective, it prevents the author from taking an interest in the transformations of the nature of the regime and in how the Chinese model(s) represent a genuine challenge to the democratic and liberal ideal; from a theoretical perspective, it would give precedence to Michel de Certeau and Erving Goffman over Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Alain Touraine, and here it appears to be more a question of faith than reason. Of course

1. Eric Sautédé, “Pour en finir avec les ‘technologies de la libération’: Internet, société civile et politique en Chine” (Down with “technologies of liberation”: Internet, civil society and politics in China), *Hermès*, December 2009, No. 55, pp. 133-40.
2. From Wikipedia: “Astroturfing refers to political, advertising, or public relations campaigns that are designed to mask the sponsors of the message to give the appearance of coming from a disinterested, grassroots participant.”

these objections do not overshadow the merits of this work, since in the end there is no debate without disagreement, and no open academic life without debate!

■ Translated by Laetitia Mottet.

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Gerard Lemos,
The End of the Chinese Dream:
Why Chinese people fear the fu-
ture, New Haven/ London, Yale Uni-
versity Press, 2012, ix + 301 pp.

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China is changing very fast. There is no doubt about that. Nearly 350 million Chinese are expected to migrate to the cities before 2030. To cope with that transformation, China will have to build more than 50,000 new high-rise buildings, and 170 cities will need new mass transit systems. Road network, highways, railways, and airports will have to expand 60 percent by 2030 (p. 185).

Comprehending the desires of the Chinese people facing this rapidly moving future is a tremendous challenge. In this effort, the very original survey presented by Gerard Lemos in this book is surely worth mentioning.

While a visiting professor at a university in Chongqing between 2006 and 2010, Lemos devised an original method to explore, in a scientific fashion, what ordinary people in Chongqing were really thinking and dreaming about. His strategy was to use a traditional object found everywhere in China called the "wish tree," which is used during folk celebrations as a popular expression of devotion by traditional Tibetan Buddhists as well as by Daoists, and not only in China but also in Japan and in Korea. The function of these trees, on which the people are invited to attach papers expressing their wishes, is based on the belief that the wind carries prayers, including wishes written on sheets of paper, from earth to heaven. Lemos prepared his special survey at the beginning of 2007 by asking a graphic artist in the UK to design such a tree and corresponding leaf cards. The tree was printed on posters the size of large advertising boards. The leaf-shaped cards contained only four questions: Who are you? What event changed your life? What is your biggest worry? What do you wish for?

Lemos obtained a kind of official go-ahead through some senior officials in the Chongqing Civil Affairs Bureau that he got interested in his project. In May 2007, his Wish Tree was installed successively in three different locations in Chongqing. The first was in Hemu Lu (Harmony Road), a new housing development for farmers. At this first stop, 311 participants put leaves on the tree. The next day, another wish tree was erected in the community square of Ma'anshan, a village of 1,500 residents located in the northeast corner of

Chongqing, and 624 more cards were collected there. In both places a community worker prepared for the event with posters that invited people to the wish tree. Lemos himself delivered a short speech in Mandarin, after which people took cards, thought carefully about their responses, and then put them on the tree. The next day, a third wish tree was erected in Banshanercun in Jiulongpo District, a large community stretching along winding roads and dominated by a long, brick factory where 3,000 people had once worked producing tyres, but in which only 1,000 were still employed at the time of the experiment. Another 492 wish cards were collected there. In this way, a total of 1,427 cards were collected. Gerard Lemos then had them translated and analysed thematically.

What appears from the careful analysis made by Lemos of these very spontaneous expressions of ordinary Chinese people's desires is that "their future expectations are pragmatically limited" (p. 97). All they seem to desire is what we would call an easier life: they are worried about health problems, they wish to have a home, to get a car, to have enough money to feel secure about the future, to be able to travel. In that sense, Chinese peoples' desires are similar to those of all human beings. As in most parts of the world, men were more likely to express financial ambitions and wish for money than women, who tended to seek security and happiness (p. 101), and as elsewhere, government jobs offer so much security that people avidly seek them, even if it is the most humble job imaginable as sewage porter (*tiao fen*) (p. 89).

But the basic problem in contemporary China, according to Lemos, seems to be that these modest ambitions, what could be called "the true Chinese dream," are becoming a kind of utopia for more and more Chinese excluded from the benefits of change. What gives real strength to his analysis is his frequent quoting of the people themselves. The global picture of Chinese society that comes out of this book is quite pessimistic, and Lemos concludes with these words: "The Chinese dream cultivated in the 1980s of prosperity, security, stability and even the beginning of freedom is at an end" (p. 271).

The growing violence of Chinese society is depicted in detail. People's deep worries concerning education are explained carefully with the observation that the educational budget can absorb up to one third of a family's income, the average being about 20 percent, and as much as one half in the countryside (p. 132). The author also analyses in detail how deficiencies in the health-care system explain why anxieties over health make up the largest group of concerns on the Wish Tree. And in fact, the proportion of personal expenditure devoted to healthcare has risen enormously, from 21.2 percent of the total in 1980 to 49.6 percent in 2006, after reaching 60 percent in 2000. It is not surprising in this context that there appears to be no real solution at hand. If a solution exists, people do not seem to believe it could come from the government. The credibility of those in power is regularly and harshly questioned. During the earthquake in Sichuan of May 2008, 6,898 classrooms collapsed, 4,737 students were killed, and more than 16,000 were injured, but many people observed, "while the schools collapsed, many of the structures that survived largely unscathed were government and Party buildings" (p. 148).

Observed from this perspective, the so-called Chinese future seems quite dark. The glimmering of hope that remains, as Lemos notes in his afterword, is that "recent history is full of examples of unheralded turns of event" (p. 273). The reader finishes this book with the secret hope that this might eventually happen in China, fearing only, with and for the Chinese people, that it may not.

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