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

Gerard Lemos, *The End of the Chinese Dream: Why Chinese people fear the future*

New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2012, ix + 301 pages.

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1 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).

2 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.

3 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?

- 4 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.
- 5 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).
- 6 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).
- 7 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 healthcare 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 and 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).

- 8 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 secrete hope that this might eventually happen in China, fearing only, with and for the Chinese people, that it may not.

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