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special issue of *Agone*, No. 52, 2013, 232 pp.

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- 1 The journal *Agone*’s issue No. 52 is interesting on several counts. The collection of texts, written mainly by renowned Chinese intellectuals, attempts to examine “China from the inside, devoid of Orientalist colourings and fascination for economic performance.”¹ It adds to a list of translations into French beginning with the *Écrits édifiants et curieux sur la Chine du xx^e siècle* (Edifying and Curious Writings on China in the Twentieth Century) edited by Chen Yan and Marie Holzman (éditions de l’Aube) in 2003. Also noteworthy are the journal *Diogène*’s issue No. 221 on trends in political philosophy, published in 2008, and issue No. 31 of the journal *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* (Far East, Far West) edited by Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval in 2009 and devoted to the political situation in China today. This special issue of *Agone* is thus part of the indispensable – and still too rare – effort to introduce texts by Chinese scholars concerned with the present and future evolution of their country; a perspective “from the inside” that is crucial to understanding the reality of this large and troubled nation. The dozen texts gathered here were previously published in the English language flagship of the intellectual Left, the *New Left Review*, between 1998 and 2013. It deals with different aspects – social, political, cultural – of China at the start of the twenty-first century.
- 2 Chinese nationalism (and its instrumentalisation by the regime as a tool of legitimisation) was most apparent in the 1990s and remains much discussed. It is therefore logical that the issue opens with this theme, first with a text by Benedict Anderson, whose essay *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) has become a reference. That is followed by Wang Chaohua’s comparison of Chinese and Taiwanese nationalism. She also cites Anderson in referring to the idea of “extra-territorial” nationalism in order to analyse Taiwan’s case, i.e., nationalism similar in form to that of the 13 American colonies seeking freedom from metropolitan tutelage (p. 28). The two

texts dealing with the ethnicisation of nationalism – or Han-centrism – facilitate a better theoretical grounding to tackle Tsering Shakya’s account of the causes behind the violent riots of 2008 in China’s border regions. Recounting the history of relations between Chinese and Tibetans, especially since the protests of the late 1980s, the Canada-based Tibetan Studies specialist paints a grim portrait of the situation in the region, where any expression of Tibetan identity is equated with separatism and therefore repressed.

- 3 Hong Ho-fung’s text offers a good lesson in economics (even for those most allergic to the discipline): clearly analysing China’s comportment during the 2009 financial crisis, he reconstructs the Chinese development “model” and most persuasively deconstructs widely held ideas on the *yuan*’s undervaluation or the “inexhaustible” reserve of labour in the Chinese countryside (p. 84). He also analyses the effects of Chinese wage competitiveness on the world in general and on Asian neighbours in particular and offers simple keys for understanding the reasons for the intertwining of the Chinese and American economies. In his view, the “flying geese paradigm” centred on Japan was replaced in 2005 by a “Sino-centric production network” that allows China to supply the United States with cheap products while using its savings to finance their purchase by Americans (p. 91).
- 4 Pursuing the same iconoclastic impulse, He Qinglian presents an alarming analysis of the Chinese social structure. In a text written in 2000, a little after the polemics that followed her book *Xiandaihua de xianjin* (Pitfalls of Modernisation, 1998) and which led her to leave China in 2001, the author returns to the idea of a “South-Americanisation” of Chinese society and the growing concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a “political and intellectual elite that no longer believes in the future of the country it is governing” (p. 176). She mounts a spirited attack on the persistent myth of a large “middle class” seeking representation and thus political rights. She also expresses slim hope of the evolution of what she calls “intermediate organisations” (associations, NGOs, professional groups...), a conclusion that has proven sadly prescient over the last decade.
- 5 Also noteworthy is the discussion of major actors in the 1989 protests (Wang Chaohua, Wang Dan and Li Mingqi) published on the tenth anniversary of the Tiananmen movement in the *New Left Review*. Taking up the issue of the “ruthless exploitation of a large and cheap labour force” (p. 137), the discussion turns to the historic nature of the 1989 spring protests that heralded the end of the Cold War and of the communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe and Russia. Comparisons with the 1848 People’s Spring, or even with 1968, in terms of the crushing of utopianism and idealism due to the obligations of – political and economic – realism are scintillating, especially as narrated by actors whose lives were overturned by the events.
- 6 Especially noteworthy is the article by Ying Qian, who teaches at the Australian National University, on the political discourse expressed in contemporary Chinese documentary films, retracing their origins and the major milestones in their history. She traces to 1984 the modern turn in the Chinese documentary and the inspiration for younger generations in images devoid of the “dramaturgy” of Antonioni’s famous 1972 documentary (*Chung Kuo – China*). The rest of the article looks at the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, noting the hesitations, doubts, and advances of a discipline “seeking political relevance” as it confronts the regime, its own insignificance, and the market (p. 198). Combining artistic discipline and political enquiry, the author helps get to the heart of “an alternative source of analyses, experiences, and mobilisations of solidarity” through which it becomes possible to envisage “social change and a reconfigured public sphere” (p. 203).

- 7 Finally, the last two texts concern the journal *Dushu*. The first is an extract from an article by Zhang Yongle published in 2008 in the context of the dismissal of the team of editors led by Wang Hui and Huang Ping. The article notes the journal’s importance in contemporary China’s intellectual upbringing. The second is an extract of an interview with Wang in which he returns – yet again – to his disaffection with Chinese liberals, whom he accuses of many intellectual sins. These two extracts also quite accurately reflect the tone of Chinese intellectual debate over the events of the first decade of the century. Particularly noteworthy is the bitterness highlighted by Wang over Western “political hypocrisy” (p. 215), which became evident during the 1990s and led to a considerable loss of attraction for democratic ideals.
- 8 *Agone*, an independent journal founded in Marseille in 1990, deserves praise for bringing to the French public important works that can fuel a reflection on a China too often hidden behind official obfuscations of “Chinese characteristics” and their Western counterparts of “Chinese otherness.” By removing China from the closed domain of Chinese Studies and opening it up to everyone, the journal has done yeoman service. China is not just “five thousand years of history” but is perceived through a well-grounded reality of current difficulties characterised by a divorce from promises of social justice and a headlong leap into the lure of consumption. The overall impression evoked after reading these articles is one of pervasive pessimism (with the notable exception of Wang Hui’s) – a pessimism at odds with the soothing optimism underlying some discussions of Chinese growth and that raises questions of the degree of blindness indispensable for penetrating the Chinese market.
- 9 It is on the contradictions within liberalism in China that this issue of *Agone* offers a particularly interesting perspective. Indeed, if the back cover of the review seems tilted toward a certain Leftist criticism that holds that “liberals regard ordinary Chinese with goodwill so long as they contribute to the development of the market as consumers,” the texts in the book are as much the work of intellectuals identified with the New Left as of Chinese “liberals.” While social issues inform most of the special issue, it seems hazardous to list He Qinglian or Hung Ho-Fung in the nebulous “New Left.” This evident tension between coverage and content indicates the difficulty the West has in distinguishing among divisions in the Chinese intellectual landscape. By highlighting liberal intellectuals’ interest in social issues, the texts in the special issue strongly invalidate New Left postulates of a chasm between the “liberals” and the “people” and show contemporary Chinese liberalism’s proximity to certain intellectual articulations of European and American intellectuals.
- 10 In order to understand the reasons for these gaps in the perception of contemporary Chinese intellectual and ideological currents, it would be instructive to examine the discursive strategies developed by the “New Left” in China and elsewhere. By accusing pro-reform “liberal” intellectuals of being partly responsible for economic liberalisation and thus for the catastrophic effects of neo-liberal developments since the mid-1990s, “New Left” critics seem to have found a sympathetic ear among both the Communist authorities, incapable of theoretically forgiving themselves for abandoning the revolutionary promises of equality and social justice, and European and American anti-globalisation movements, which were seeking new sources of support.
- 11 Behind these accusations lies a semantic derailment that looks much like a fraud. Terms such as “liberalism” and “neo-liberalism” are as equivocal as their theoretical origins are heterogeneous (Rosanvallon, *La société des égaux* [Society of equals], 2011, p. 328). Chinese

liberals of the 1980s saw private property as the ultimate institutional protection for the individual from the state. Their common enemy was the totalitarian leviathan they had all confronted. The traumatic experience solidified a certain intellectual consensus in which the triptych of the individual, human rights, and democracy were seen as the surest fortifications against abuses of power. At that point, the excesses of (neo-)liberal development – social polarisation, marginalisation, and environmental destruction – had not yet had global consequences. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were just beginning their rule, unleashing “the great 1980s nightmare” (Cusset, *La Découverte*, 2006). Condemning liberals for the later results of the neo-liberal tendencies of the 1990s has been a convenient manipulation partly to blame for the misunderstandings between Chinese liberal intellectuals and European and American Leftists.

- 12 Finally, it must be noted that apart from Wang Hui, most of the Chinese authors in this collection are now *persona non grata* in mainland China, reflecting the sad reality of a country divorced from a portion of its intelligentsia. Nevertheless, by continuing to write and inform on the situation in their country, these intellectuals contribute to a “cultural China” in the process of emerging as, in the economist Hung Ho-Fung’s words, an “offshore civil society” on which China might hope to count on to escape from the pitfalls of its modernisation.
- 13 1. Link to the Agone website: <http://agone.org/revueagone/agone52/index.html>.

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