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- 1 This volume originated in a research collaboration project (2006-2009) among Chinese and French sociologists and anthropologists seeking to “observe the processes of action, association, and coordination.” It analyses the multiple “forms of joint actions and collective initiatives, often disorganised and sometimes fleeting occurring in Chinese society now” (p. 11). While the texts assembled do not take a common theoretical approach, they nevertheless share an anchoring in solid ethnographic work and pay special attention to communication, both oral and written (p. 13).
- 2 Furthermore, despite the diversity of contributions, Isabelle Thireau’s introduction picks out several elements that could serve as kernels of the various contributions: the importance of a certain number of spaces (or their destruction) for “face-to-face” interactions or more virtual venues whether private or public, enabling the establishment of an “inter-subjectivity,” base for concerted action; the role “of promises, agreements, and engagements” and their importance for the social tissue in China today; a plurality of “us” noted in situations of association, cooperation, and action, as well as in “choices of action” and a diversity of “links between possibilities and choices”; and finally, accomplished collective actions with different modalities of public “visibility” (pp. 14-19).
- 3 The wealth and complexity of social relations dealt with by the various contributions reflects another transversal issue in all the texts in this volume, that of different modalities of links between those who mobilise and form associations on the one hand and state agents on the other. These relations may include asymmetry, reciprocity, mutual dependence, cooperation, instrumentalisation, and co-optation.
- 4 The first two chapters deal with the Mao era in a highly complementary manner, each tackling little-studied aspects of the period. Drawing inspiration from Hannah Arendt’s notion of “atomisation,” Chang Shu examines how the Chinese Communist Party managed to block the building of social relations that could have helped the people of Dazhai Village act collectively or even oppose the domination system introduced there. The article makes special reference to the political violence linked to two major campaigns – the first following Japan’s capitulation in 1945 and the second as part of agrarian reforms through which the Party established its hold on rural society in Xiyang District (Dazhai Village), directly exposing people to political terror and blocking them from any protection through intermediary associations. Chang pays special attention to the role of “activists” (*jijifenzi*) within mass movements (*yundong*), accounting for up to 20% of the local population. The author explains that some of them were motivated to become activists by a desire not to be targeted in a mass movement (pp. 33, 38). In Chang’s view, apart from the suppression of local associations, the atmosphere of political terror could also have helped the party

achieve its project of “transformation of the population’s thinking” (p. 44). On this point, it may be worth asking whether the author has not gone somewhat speedily from the suppression of alternative public discourse and of the possibility for people to organise themselves in associations to the effective transformation of their thinking, meaning the Party would have managed to block imagination even of an alternative social order or of another reality. It would have been helpful if Chang had tested this argument against social science literature dealing with hegemony and the process of symbolic and material resistance.

- 5 In the next contribution, Hua Linshan investigates what led residents of Xiaogang Village (Anhui Province) in 1978 to enter into a pact to oppose the official collectivist policy in agricultural production, thus taking on the major risk of exposure to repression. The author shows that those behind the decision had been marked by a shared experience of the indignities suffered during the dark days of the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward. This collective experience of indignities suffered also induced an attitude of passive resistance-turned-indifference towards collectivist organisation modes. This is similar to what Eric Hobsbawm wrote in 1973 about the resistance of subject populations who seek to minimise the harm done by a system of domination imposed on them. Hua also shows that “direct” and “personal” experiences of the realities of the famine, of poverty, and of indignities were stronger than a “compulsory and omnipresent” language associated with the system [and with terror] seen as being at the origin of a situation deemed unacceptable (p. 70). Interestingly, the villagers’ decision to oppose official policy by signing a collective pact was taken *without prior recourse to discussion*, and lying outside “any debate or controversy, it was oriented by an experience both singular and shared, by physical and psychological sufferings endured during more than 20 years by the farmers concerned” (p. 84). The author’s stress on the non-recourse to discussion in the face of shared indignities, which seemed like “normative evidence,” is interesting as it challenges the argument developed by James C. Scott that such experience tends to engender a collective discourse of indignity; in the specific conditions of Xiaogang it seems not to have taken place (Scott, 1990).
- 6 With more than ten years of observation in Qiejiazhuang Village (Hebei Province), Liu Xiaojing looks into elections organised there for heads of village committees and the manner in which different protagonists mobilise professional, personal, and political links to influence the electoral process. The study shows power relations in the village not being fundamentally altered by the elections. Nevertheless, the management of local affairs tends to get less asymmetric and the space for discussion, agreement, and negotiation greater and more productive than earlier. In Liu’s view, this “institutional innovation” has induced incertitude in the rural community and nurtured the “eventual development [...] of other ways of acting together” (p. 122).
- 7 In the next chapter, Caroline Bodolec examines new mobilisations and associations around the artistic village of Xiaocheng and the Museum of Popular Culture of the Nianpan Plateau in Yanchuan District (Shaanxi Province). She documents the extent to which such initiatives bring together local actors and Chinese scholars collaborating with foreign actors and institutions. Although relatively independent from local authorities to begin with, such initiatives were rendered possible because of a form of recognition – even co-optation – and goodwill on the part of powers that be. The issue

of modalities of relations with the Party-state also finds pride of place in the next contribution.

- 8 Based on the biographical sketch of a rural migrant who formed in Beijing's Dongcun area an association devoted to migrants from rural areas, Isabelle Thireau draws attention to an important issue recurring in several contributions in the volume: the necessity of those who organise collectively to be identified and recognised by local authorities in order "to be able to act and eventually overcome the limits" (p. 171). Such recognition could take the form of the association displaying a "plaque" attesting that its activities are "supported and supervised" (p. 171). Thireau refers to local authorities' "right to review" those organising themselves in associations, such a right taking on, in certain circumstances, arbitrary and intimidating dimensions extending up to the closure of the association in some cases, followed by an equally sudden withdrawal of the ban imposed on the association despite its prior closure. Thireau also stresses the concern on the part of those active in such associations not to have too high a public *visibility*. The fortunes of the association studied in this contribution show a "large spectre of local authorities' actions depending on their appreciation, given the circumstance, of the merits or political risks carried by official backing to such activities" (p. 175).
- 9 In the following text, Liu Chun Brenda relies on Bruno Latour's network society approach and explores the normative links mobilised during collective actions in the case of a mobilisation movement of a residents' collective seeking to resist an urban development project in several areas of Shenzhen. She clearly illustrates the extent to which participants in the mobilisation use a large array of resources and organisational forms, and the lines between the just and unjust, public and private being "in constant redefinition" (p. 217). During the mobilisation, collective action is transformed into an essentially legal one, after having endured several reversals, and is steered towards higher echelons of state hierarchy (for instance the Environmental Protection Bureau) and a series of accommodations with local authorities.
- 10 In the next chapter, Elisabeth Allès deals with the more or less formal modes of associations formed by three categories of Uyghur migrants in Guangzhou: temporary workers, traders, and officials. As in the case of the chapter dealing with migrants' associations in Beijing, the link between the experience of institutional discrimination and the desire to organise in order to confront arbitrary actions and abuse are well documented.
- 11 In the book's last contribution, Wang Hansheng and Wang Yige offer a most detailed analysis of the "administrative responsibility system" (*mubiao guanli zerenzhi*) linking Party committees and local governments. They draw attention to the fact that the system, which has no basis in legal texts or regulations regarding governmental actions, nevertheless plays a crucial role in the "way the authorities work at the base of the local level administration" (p. 243). The chapter's main interest lies in its explanation of the fact that during the transition from the Mao era to that of economic reform, it was among others the "responsibility by objectives system" that helped build institutional links among different vertical and territorial administrations, between the state and enterprises, as well as between townships and villages. Because it attributes the responsibility of proper implementation of a single valid contract for the state and the Party to the secretary of the Party committee, the system commands an important function in that it makes an operational linkage between the state and the Party. The

authors explain this logic by specifying that “the village or Resident’s Committees and local governments” are linked by “a chain of responsibility (*zeren liandai guanxi*) which integrates everyone in a community of obligations and interests [...] and a unit of action” (pp. 271, 293). It is worth noting that the system offers some elbow room for lower-level cadres as regards the carrying out of tasks, the main constraint being one of objectives, which “makes possible institutional novelties stemming from accommodations and transgressions” (pp. 303-304).

- 12 Seven of the nine texts (including the introduction) are in French and two in English, something that could have done with an explanation. However, this takes nothing away from the great quality and originality of the contributions gathered in this work, which contributes greatly towards clarifying the dynamics of formation of different modalities of association. The analyses are solidly supported, and each of the texts is based on real ethnographic riches illuminating the complexity of social and political relations in contemporary China.

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